THE POETICS OF WAR, 1914 - 1918.

A survey of evolving attitudes - moral, religious, social, political, and to nature - in the poetry of the First World War, and the impact of these on poetic technique and definitions of the poetic function.

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What did they expect of our toil and extreme
Hunger - the perfect drawing of a heart's dream?
Did they look for a book of wrought art's perfection,
Who promised no reading, nor praise, nor publication?
Out of the heart's sickness the spirit wrote
For delight, or to escape hunger, or of war's worst anger,
When the guns died to silence and men would gather sense
Somehow together, and find this was life indeed.

IVOR GURNEY. (1)

frankness as never before,
disillusions as never told in the old days,
hysterias, trench confessions,
laughter out of dead bellies.

EZRA POUND. (2)

(1) Ivor Gurney : 'War Books', HUSS. p. 154.

(2) Ezra Pound : 'Hugh Selwyn Mauberley', HUSS. p. 158.

NOTES ON ABBREVIATIONS USED.

Whenever possible, references are given to a number of anthologies, fairly representative in their totality. Not only does this facilitate reference, but it gives a clear index of the corpus of war poetry that has sustained itself over half a century. The first two are very much contemporary with the war, the third was published in 1930, and the last three are all modern anthologies, with a thematic structure.

PPER - Pro Patria et Rege, ed. W.A. Knight, London, 1915.

MIA - The Man in Arms, ed. E.B. Osborne, London, 1918.

BAWP - An Anthology of War Poems, ed. F. Brereton, London, 1930.

ULD - Up the Line to Death, ed. Brian Gardner, London, 1965.

MWMA - Men Who March Away, ed. I.M. Parsons, London, 1964.

HUSS - The Poetry of the First World War, ed. Maurice Hussey, London, 1967.

When CP or CW is used, this will refer to the following Collected Poems or Works:

Wilfred Owen : Collected Poems, ed. C. Day Lewis, London, 1963.

Siegfried Sassoon : Collected Poems, 1908 - 56, London, 1961.

Herbert Read : Collected Poems, London, 1966.

Edmund Blunden : Poems, 1914 - 30, London, 1930.

Isaac Rosenberg : Collected Poems, ed. Bottomley and Harding, London, 1949.

Edward Thomas : Collected Poems, London, 1949.

Isaac Rosenberg : Collected Works, ed. Bottomley and Harding, London, 1937.

The abbreviation LFE is used for The Collection of Letters, ed. by Laurence Housman, Letters of Fallen Englishmen, London, 1930.

SECTION I

INTRODUCTORY

This thesis is based on the conviction that the selection of matter is in itself a formalistic activity, and examines in this light how basic shifts in the notional concepts of and attitudes to war from 1914 - 18 engendered technical change.

In this introductory section I want to examine a number of twentiety-century critical misconceptions about the nature of 'war poetry' as a genus, and about First World War poetry in particular. Two other considerations seem relevant - the general literary situation and critical climate immediately preceding the poetry of these four dramatic years, and finally, in this context, the contemporary poet's self-criticisms and their notions of what constituted the poetic function.

Subsequently, I will trace the evolving attitudes to the war in three sections, dealing in turn with the impact of the war on attitudes to nature, on moral and religious attitudes, and on socio-political attitudes, tracing how and why technique and concepts of the poet's function were modified accordingly.

The poetry produced by this war has continued to fascinate, without ever quite convincing that its merits are poetic rather than historical. In large measure this explains the continuing dichotomy between the anthologists and the literary critics. In the anthologies it is not only the war poems of 'accepted' poets like Owen, Sassoon, and Rosenberg which find their place. Rickword, Sorley, Binyon and many lesser luminaries, like the old soldiers they celebrate, never die; and the 'fading away' that was the contemporary alternative seems to be taking an unconscionably long time.

Indeed, there have been recently a number of new anthologies(1) specifically dedicated to the poetic output of the First World War, to supplement the B.B.C.'s television series(2) and the theatre and cinema versions of Oh What a Lovely War(3) Such productions and anthologies reflect not only our present preoccupation with the Great War as human lunacy paramount, but also continuing popular taste over the years.

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(1) See for example - Men Who March Away. ed. Parsons. London 1965
Up the Line to Death ed.Gardner. London 1964
Poetry of the First World War ed. Hussey. Bristol 1967

(2) B.B.C. Television series which ran for 26 weeks - 'The Great War' produced by Tony Essex and Gordon Watkins. (B.B.C.2 May - Nov., 1964, B.B.C.1 Oct. '64 - April '65).

(3) Miss Joan Littlewood's production at Wyndham's, 1963 was followed by Richard Attenborough's filmed version in 1968.

The critics, on the other hand, remain unconvinced, though there is a strange ambivalence detectable in their position. For the critics as for everyone else, the poetry that this war produced - and it produced some five hundred volumes(1) - remains the yard-stick against which 'war poetry' is measured, and critics tend to draw consistently their examples of what is 'good war poetry' and 'bad war poetry' from the hectic of these same four years. This position of 1914 - 18 war poetry was never seriously challenged by the avowedly technically superior poetry of the Second World War, which had twenty years of major modernist thinking tucked inspirationally behind it.

It seems to me that a great deal of wrong-footed modern criticism derives ultimately from basic failures in perception: First of all, a failure to grasp the historical uniqueness of the Great War, and secondly, a circumscribed view of the conditions necessary to the achievement of genuine artistic statement. From one or other of these limitations derive four important critical pronouncements reflecting the consensus of misconception throughout the subsequent decades: Yeat's remarks in his preface to the Oxford Book of Modern Verse, Eliot's 'A Note on War Poetry', Graham Hough's review of Owen's Collected Poems in 'The Guardian' and the introductory section of J.H. Johnston's -

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(1) I am indebted for this figure to Maurice Hussey, English Poetry of the First World War, Bristol, 1967, Page 161.

English Poetry of the First World War(1) The comments of these critics are worth examination not only because they are typical but because they are authoratitve, having in one way or other set and maintained the pattern of critical thought.

But first of all, as a preliminary to this examination, let me try to establish what I see as the historical uniqueness of World War I. The fascination it has exercised since it happened has grown rather than diminished:

> My father was a 1914 - 18 front line soldier. Had he been an archer at Agincourt, it couldn't have been remoter to me - this carnage on the wet Flanders plain that ended only a few years before my birth. Yet the battle-names I first heard from him, Arras and the Somme, Vimy Ridge and Passchendaele, hung in my head sombre as gunsmoke.
> And what speared me most was a song from the trenches, a parody of mocking melancholy, 'If you want the old battalion,' it is said, with brutal poignancy,' I know where it is.
>
> 'It's hanging on the old barbed wire
> I've seen 'em, I've seen 'em,
> Hanging on the old barbed wire.'
>
> It haunted my childhood. Even then I felt its terrible irony and resignation, the imminence of mass scarecrow death in the desolation of no-man's-land faced with a phlegmatic realism beyond anguish.
> It has never ceased to haunt me - nor, I believe, all those of the generations born since it was over. (2)

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(1) W.B. Yeats: preface, Oxford Book of Modern Verse, London, 1936.
T.S. Eliot: 'A Note on War Poetry', C.P. 1902-62, London, 1963. p. 229(originally in London Calling ed. Storm Jameson, (New York, 1942).
Graham Hough: 'Matched With Their Hour','Guardian' 24 Aug.1964.
J.H. Johnston: English Poetry of the First World War,London 1964, pp. 3 - 20.

(2) Kenneth Allsop: Scan. 'Notes on a War'. London, 1965. p. 168.

It is not only that it was the death-throes of the nineteenth century and the birth-pangs of the twentieth occuring simultaneously. The neat antithetical syntax of such explanations as this always owes a great deal to the fact that it is an over-simplification. In the inevitable complex of reasons there are two I will mention now. One is that at some point in these four years the attitude to war shifted, and the other is the very nature and progression of the war itself, particularly on the Western Front, a stupid slaughter conducted in a mammoth European graveyard-cum-rubbish dump that extended from the Channel to the Alps.

The First World War was the costly prolongation of an impasse. The controlling military minds were disciples of the gospel of mass laid down by Clausewitz, the Prussian military philosopher, and thus demanded larger armies than they had the strategic and logistic skills to manipulate. While they came reluctantly to recognize the military applications of twentieth century technology, they failed to grasp that such new weapons and the concept of mass made strange bedfellows. It was this failure that produced the horror of a trench war, which allowed, in fact, the military results of modern applied science to be used with most devastating effect. The massed armies not only used artillery as never before but themselves provided static targets. Troops were still so deployed against the machine-gun, progressively refined and mass-produced, that it was used against them with maximum effect. The first lesson of the First World War was that modern warfare was to be different.

The consequent problem was in teaching this lesson. The war, after the German advance had been halted at the Marne, became static very quickly, as it did later in Gallipoli, Salonika, and the

Austro-Italian fronts. Because the war was bogged down, casualties were so immense that the personnel were constantly changing. Just as Ypres was the graveyard of the Old Contemptibles in 1914, so the Somme Offensive, with its 420,000 casualties, consumed Kitchener's volunteer divisions in July, 1916. And these lessons, it seemed, had to be taught and learned in the pain, misery, courage, dirt, comradeship and degradation of front-line reality.

The 1914 - 1918 struggle, of course, did not initiate, but was part of, a changing ethos. All the old certainties that were rooted in a rural culture were already in the melting-pot:

> The continual and ever-increasing rapidity of the Industrial Revolution was year by year silently transmuting social habits, obliterating old distinctions of rank and creed, and turning a Bible-reading people with ideals based on reminiscences of rural or burgher life and a hierarchy of classes, into the city population that we know.(1)

Tyndall and Huxley, the Oxford Movement, Kingsley's Christian Socialism, the Trade Union Movement, Frazer, the Workers' Federation, the Fabian Society, Shaw, Jowett, Colenso, tramways, electricity, municipal socialism, Keir Hardy, the Labour Party, the Daily Mail, the Boy Scouts, the Co-operative Movement, the motor-car, Suffragettes, Yeats, the Town Planning Act, Eliot, Pound, Old Age Pensions - the old order was changing. The war brought to the many an awareness of change already discerned by the few. But in itself it was also a painful acceleration of that process.

Some certainties, like the belief that British infantry could not retreat, died soon. Others survived till the crushing disillusion of the Somme failure. 1915, the year of the Second Battle of Ypres in February (when poison gas was first used), the

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(1) G.M. Trevelyan: A History of England, London, 1945, p.691

year of the costly and abortive failures of Neuve Chapelle and Loos, when 60,000 men died for a few hundred yards of ground -

> A plot....
> Which is not tomb enough and continent
> To hide the slain.

was a year that saw doubts grow. There was a lull when the autumn of the year settled into a winter of attrition, a lull when the survivors had time to evaluate old certainties in the light of experience. But the growing disillusion was replaced, as the Old Contemptibles were being replaced, by some resurgence of the old hope and enthusiasm as the massive build-up for the Somme Offensive went on. The disastrous, wasteful and cruel failure of that attempt took with it many of the Georgian attitudes. The old certainties were buried, along with a generation, in the mud of Thiepval, Fricourt, Mametz, Delville Wood, the Ancre, Beaucourt, Beaumont-Hamel. Some tried to rationalise their doubts, some voiced them hysterically - but the carnage of the Somme occasioned a radical shift in European value judgements. Despair, atheism and pacifism suddenly seemed morally justifiable. It was the birth of a modern concept of war.

W.B. Yeats was not really concerned with this war, but with the more parochial and traditional battle for Irish Nationalism. He rationalised his dislike of war poetry, and justified his exclusion of war poems from the Oxford Book, in an aesthetic statement in the Preface that is shot through with eccentricity and motivated by personal animus. He admitted to 'a distaste for certain poems written in the midst of the great war' and justified this with the dictum that 'Passive suffering is not a theme for poetry'(1)

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(1) Preface to Oxford Book of Modern Verse London, 1936, p. xxxiv.

It was Yeats's judgement that a war poet was so swamped by the exigencies of his physical, mental and emotional experiences that he was incapable of the detached objectivity which can alone achieve the proportion and control requisite to art.

> When man has withdrawn into the quicksilver at the back of the mirror no great event becomes luminous in his mind; it is no longer possible to write The Persians, Agincourt, Chevy Chase: some blunderer has driven his car on to the wrong side of the road - that is all.(1)

I find it hard to exclude 'passive suffering' from the thematic scope of poetry when confronted with Christ on the Cross, King Lear, or Samson at the mill with slaves. Furthermore the view that 1914 - 1918 poetry was exclusively concerned with 'passive suffering' is a generalisation based largely on Yeats's own failure to understand Owen. His complete failure to understand the war itself is perhaps best indicated by his unfortunate choice of language in his dismissal of the upheaval. It suggests that he was viewing the war from some Tennysonian ingle-nook. There are many respectable contemporary historians who see the war as 'some blunderer driving his car on the wrong side of the road.' But making a virtue out of monolithic blunders was no longer possible when the poets were in the Light Brigade. I doubt if it ever had been morally defensible.

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(1) Ibid.

It may well be that it was no longer possible to write 'The Persians' or 'Chevy Chase' - but not for the aesthetic reasons Yeats gave. One might as well say that it was impossible for the earlier poets to have written 'Strange Meeting' or 'Dead Man's Dump'. These are works written from basically different notional concepts of war - 'that is all.' And the reason why the later poets offer subjective, personal and 'strategically' circumscribed statements is because that is what modern war permits in simple physical conditions. We must consider that these may be the apt statements and the appropriate forms that combatants need to say what they want to say.

And indeed, one must ask what were 'the great events' of the Great War that should have become luminous? The Somme? Verdun? The French Army going on strike? Vimy Ridge? The Armistice? But if no great events were becoming luminous many seemingly insignificant events certainly were - Kneeshaw,(1) a dead Boche, a soldier carrying a plank to the Front. What, of course, underlies Yeats' 'becoming luminous' was a desire for extrication, for distance in time and place, for Wordsworthian tranquillity in which emotion could be refined into poetry. There was for Yeats no possibility that art just might, in the new circumstances be produced by the white heat of violent experience, and that proportion and control might come from the bitterness, the fear, the grief, the desperation, from the very immediacy. And yet deep grief, as we know, has a way of shaping itself rhythmically, antithetically, and repetitively, of achieving an incantatory quality that is often, in essence, 'poetic'.

(1) See Herbert Read: 'Kneeshaw Goes to War', Collected Poems, London, 1966, pp. 29 - 33.

T.S. Eliot's 'A Note on War Poetry' is worth quoting in its entirety, compounding as it typically does observations of insight, intuitive perception, singular lapses, and an ambiguity of expression which renders interpretation hazardous:

> Not the expression of collective emotion
> Imperfectly reflected in the daily papers,
> Where is the point at which the merely individual
> Explosion breaks
> In the path of an action merely typical
> To create the universal, originate a symbol
> out of the impact? This is a meeting
> On which we attend
> Of forces beyond control by experiment -
> Of Nature and the Spirit. Mostly the individual
> Experience is too large, or too small. Our emotions
> Are only 'incidents'
> In the effort to keep day and night together.
> It seems just possible that a poem might happen
> To a very young man: but a poem is not poetry -
> That is a life
> War is not a life: it is a situation,
> One which may neither be ignored nor accepted,
> A problem to be met with ambush and stratagem,
> Enveloped or scattered
> The enduring is not a substitute for the transient
> Neither one for the other. But the abstract conception
> Of private experience at its greatest intensity
> Becoming universal, which we call 'poetry',
> May be affirmed in verse (1).

Soldiers may 'affirm in verse' or may, being young men, write a poem, but they seem debarred from 'poetry' - 'That is a life'. What constitutes in Eliot's terms, a life - years or perception, age or insight? Does this bar that separates Owen and Rosenberg from 'poetry' also exclude Fergusson, Shelley, Keats? How young is 'a very young man'?

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(1) T.S. Eliot: 'A note on War Poetry', C.P. 1902 - 62. London, 1963. p.229.

Eliot's whole distinction between 'poem' and 'poetry' seems to me quite spurious, though given an acceptability by its seemingly logical juxtaposition of 'life' and 'situation', 'enduring' and 'transient'. But the First World War, to these poets, was not just a situation to be 'met with ambush and stratagem'. Its real significance lay, perhaps, in that it became a way of life, a way of death. This is a point I shall touch on later.

But there are too many 'exclusions' here, and not only on the grounds of age and inadequate experience. 'The expression of collective emotion' is also excluded, which means that what Dr. Johnson saw as the merits of Gray's 'Elegy' were indeed those aspects that barred it from poetry. It is perhaps significant that Eliot bolsters this statement with a reference to the daily papers, even though he concedes their 'imperfection'. Then he searches, with a great deal of courage, to define the essence of poetry, in terms of the individual explosion creating a universal symbol out of what may be a typical action, and suggests, rightly in my view, that this is not necessarily to be achieved by technique and theory, but by 'forces beyond control by experiment.'

I would agree also that the individual experience is usually too large or too small - otherwise we would all be creative artists. What I do question is the measuring-stick Eliot is using to define large and small. Is it age? Or does he have in mind the conditions of contemporary warfare that make it impossible for the combatant to see the whole battle or war, and inevitable that he shall lose the larger issues in the petty survival of platoon or company, skirmish and stratagem. If so, it would explain

certainly why Sir Douglas Haig wasn't a poet! And it would accord with such critics as Douglas Jerrold in The Lie About the War (London 1930) who argues against the contemporary war novels on similar grounds of scope circumscribed by the physically limited horizons. But what was being written about was perhaps something different, something suggested by Frederic Manning.(1)

> War, which tested and had wrecked already so many conventions, tested not so much the general truth of a proposition, as its truth in relation to each and every individual case.

The failure to see that the poets had set themselves new tasks, or to grasp the historical uniqueness of the war, characterises the criticism of Graham Hough, a usually perceptive critic of the Romantic achievement. When he reviews Owen's Collected Poems in the Guardian he writes:

> No other war in history produced great poetry till it had been distanced by time and legend, and there is no reason why the First World War should be an exception. (2)

There may be no reason, but an exception it was, and there is no sound critical reason offered by Hough to suggest why it should not be an exception. Indeed, given the historical uniqueness of the war, the argument from the historical precedent is a dangerous ground for dogmatism. Also it is worth remembering that all that a decade of time and distance gave to Sassoon, Grave, Blunden and Aldington came out as prose.

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(1) Frederic Manning: Her Privates We, London, 1930, p.45.

(2) Graham Hough : 'Matched With Their Hour', The Guardian, 24th August, 1964.

Hough continues:

> It would be a satisfaction to feel that courage, suffering, and a great historic convulsion of themselves generated poetry; but this is not so.

Indeed, Hough is on safer ground here, for no one would dispute this. Great love, hate, fear, religious fervour and so on are not inevitably given to producing great art in any other context either. What we must beware of is Hough's assumption that because it was not inevitably so, it became downright impossible.

When in the same article Hough states:

> The finest elegies of the time, those of Yeats on Major Robert Gregory, say in effect that the war didn't matter

he is merely being eccentric. Yeats' elegies say no such thing, and even if they did, they would have to be read in the context of Yeats's and Ireland's different historical base. For whatever Yeats felt, or Mr. Hough thought he said, the war patently did 'matter'. Whatever went a long way to disrupt Europe and to destroy a generation of European manhood, whatever was 'a world war' obviously mattered, and it does not matter much how one tries to define 'matter'.

Professor Johnston 's comments, arising from a work of genuine scholarship (1) have advantages over Hough's journalism:

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(1) English Poetry of the First World War, London, 1964.

> Modern war poetry is deprived of the aesthetic advantages of temporal remotenesss; it is inextricably involved in the whole physical and psychological complex of warfare and takes its particular spirit from a dedicated and often desperate representation of that complex. This situation is further intensified by the mood of disillusion and rejection, which lends particular animus to the presentation of disagreeable aspects of modern warfare and raises special problems of selection and control (1)

Because of his general thesis that the lyric tradition was inadequate to meet the demands of this war, Johnston is committed to the position that 'selection' means, virtually, selection that will produce the sort of objectivity and thematic comprehensiveness that he admires in traditional heroic poetry. But surely all we can justly demand of a poem is that 'selection' is what must operate in terms of the 'aspect','the particular animus' that shapes the poet's point of view, and the aesthetic demands of selection and control must then be seen to operate within that area. Donne's 'The Apparition'(2), for example, is a poem of hate which can paradoxically be categorised as love poetry. It is a good or bad poem only in terms of selection operating within the confines of the poet's specific emotional statement, and Donne is not required to relate this to domestic bliss or love at first sight.

There are then, three basic areas where much contemporary criticism seems to me inadequate. There is,first of all, the failure to appreciate the critical implications of a war in which the emotional impact and the physical conditions, where poets are also soldiers,may well demand a form of expression that could be

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(1) J.H. Johnston p.12.

(2) John Donne: C.P. Oxford, 1949. p.43.

successfully achieved as the result of an artistic process differing radically from that traditionally accepted. Let us, in deference to the generally admitted achievement of Owen, Rosenberg and Sassoon, at least admit it as a possibility.

Related to this is a misconception of scope and scale that compounds war poetry with heroic poetry, demanding consequently a comprehensiveness from war poetry which, Professor Johnston rightly suggests, an exlusively lyric tradition cannot supply. But is this a reasonable demand? Given the changed scale and scope of twentieth century warfare, might it not be that the short poem - not necessarily nor exclusively the lyric - is indeed the way that modern war poetry gets itself written? More fundamentally, perhaps, is there any valid critical reason why this demand should be made of war poetry at all?

Implicit in much of the criticism we can detect a rigid adherence to some variant of the Wordsworthian 'emotion recollected in tranquillity'. While I accept that a certain disentanglement is necessary from the immediacy of an experience in order that it may be recreated in art, I question whether even Wordsworth, who was satisfied when 'five years had passed', made the demands of Professor Johnstone, who insists on 'temporal remoteness', or of Mr. Hough, who goes further and wants the experience 'distanced by time and legend.' How much disengagement in time and space is necessary for the poetic process? I would hesitate to be either as dogmatic or as inflexible as Mr. Hough.

Professor Johnstone makes much in his book of the poets' own criticisms of inadequacy.

But what could be more natural than that as young men of their time they should share the central critical precepts of their contemporaries? We are frequently told that Georgianism was diluted Romanticism. What more inevitable, then, than that they should share in current Romantic critical attitudes? But this does not prove they were right. A poet's theory and practice are not necessarily the same thing, as Wordsworth himself showed. Sassoon for example shares Professor Johnston 's desire for the heroic. When describing the return of an exhausted Infantry Division from the Somme he writes:

> It was as though I had seen the War as it might be envisioned by the mind of some epic poet a hundred years hence.(1)

Moments when one saw the war on this scale were rare, and there is a prohibitive time factor of 'a hundred years' to keep the vision from poetry. Sassoon complained that as a combatant he had been 'viewing the War through the loophole of a trench parapet'(2) What he could describe from this circumscribed position may not be good history, but there is no reason why it should not be good poetry. And when he complains,

> Armageddon was too immense for my solitary understanding.(3)

one can only ask; for whose understanding is it not?

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(1) Sassoon: Memoirs of an Infantry Officer, London, 1965. p.84.

(2) ibid: p. 197.

(3) ibid: p. 82.

The new concept of war which gradually won acceptance had its roots in the realities of the Front. Most of the poetry of 1914 and 1915 was vitiated by this fundamental conceptual shift - 'Dulce et Decorum Est Pro Patria Mori' was 'the old Lie'. We sometimes find it difficult, I think, to explain in literary critical terms just why the war poems of Rupert Brooke were so bad. For judgements that see Brooke as an escapist or puerile romantic are retrospective. His contemporaries saw him as a realist. And if we accept that the realist trafficks in contemporary properties, that he says what he wishes to say and believes to be true, that this accords with the sentiments of his contemporaries, that the experience he voices and the voice he employs are the contemporary truth, then Brooke was, in 1914, a realist.

There does not, for example, seem to me to be anything intrinsically wrong with the image of young volunteers of 1914 as 'swimmers into cleanness leaping'(1) It becomes 'bad poetry' because the image is almost immediately given the lie. The sentiment was not only crushed by subsequent experience; it began to sound like calculated and wilful evasion of the truth.

Because we accept that the poet's truth is personal, that he is not inevitably committed to an objective truth, we do not abrogate our evaluation of the poetic merit of, say, a love-poem because we discover that the poet has manifestly misrepresented his mistress. Hyperbole and self-deception are not sins in love-poets, yet they seem to be in war-poets. How then do we justify the discrepancy, for justify it we must?

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(1) Rupert Brooke: 1914, Five Sonnets, London, 1915.

It is a valid differentiation, I think, because there is a complex relationship between poem, poet, and that wider life in which both have to live. A poem is a personal and individual thing, but it has to refer back to life, which means, in the first place, the life of the poet. In the same way, however, the life of the poet has to be referred back to and derive from the life outside him, and an imbalance and distortion is created if a poem is too distant from life. This relationship establishes certain conditions for truth, and a poem is vitiated if it relies on a falsehood to life.

When a love-poet claims that his lover is beautiful in defiance of the facts, we allow that this is 'true to nature'. But when Brooke regards the 1914-18 War as a romantic re-birth he is doing more than simply transposing personal value. In retrospect, Brooke's panegyrics on the moral value of war are seen to have no natural sanction. The fact that most of his contemporaries agreed with Brooke is irrelevant. The basis of the lie is merely widened. Indeed, given Brooke's convictions, his talent and his background, it was virtually impossible for him to write what we would consider a good poem about war in 1914.

One of the factors that contributes to the critical undervaluation of the war poetry 1914-18 was that, on the Western Front, the big guns of modernistic poetic theory and practice were silent. There was no Pound, no Eliot, no Yeats, no Lawrence. So the task of interpreting poetically the greatest traumatic experience of our century devolved on a company of fledgling Georgians, reinforced for the duration by a platoon of Imagists. Far back at base, a number of Edwardian trumpets still sounded the charge. Yet when we think or talk of war poetry, we usually mean the poetry of these four years,

drawing our representatives of good and bad poetry from the same period, as I have already said. That we do so reflects the basic shift in the notional concept of war during the period.

The majority of the poets of 1914 - 1915 accepted traditional concepts of and attitudes to war, and based their idealisms and enthusiasms on an established, preconceived order. Such idealisms were as vaguely conceived as they were enthusiastically expressed because as yet there was neither realisation nor anticipation of what was to be the nature of technological warfare. Their poetry abounds in abstraction, in an imagery that is always on the surface, in that competent metrical skill which often accompanies a tepid lyrical impulse. There is a superficial symbolism, hand-me-down rhetoric, poetic cliches. It is too frequently a poetry of superficial introspection. It is, in essence, 'Georgian' in the perjorative sense in which that epithet is now critically employed.

Initally, no great dissatisfaction was evidenced, because there was little dichotomy between the emotionalism of the sentiments and the techniques that were rooted in a standardized rhetoric. Since all that was required of poetry was the endorsement and reiteration of acceptable and accepted attitudes, rhetoric, even doggerel, sufficed. The intellect was asking no questions, the imagination did not have to grasp after insight. Poetry was expressing pious hopes, and pious hopes have rarely fired the poetic imagination. Poetry had given itself nothing new to do, and had therefore no compulsion to fashion new tools.

Rupert Brooke, for instance, wrote principally of his personal reactions to war, because he knew nothing of its actualities. He was not a war-poet, but a poet anticipating war. The war offered no more than another area for self-examination. Since his generalised notions of war were inherited, and a contradiction, indeed, of the reality of the contemporary situation, we find in his war-sonnets a reversion to an aureate diction that was also a denial of the simplicity and even sordid brutal directness he had been experimenting with. His confusion is indicated by the retrogression to the mixture of self-engrossed pseudo-reflection and resonant rhetoric that shapes the December sonnets:

> Blow, bugles, blow! They brought us, for our dearth,
> Holiness, lacked so long, and Love, and Pain,
> Honour has come back, as a King, to earth,
> And paid his subjects with a royal wage;
> And Nobleness walks in our ways again,
> And we have come into our heritage. (1)

One must assume that 'our dearth' was that 'world grown old and cold and weary' that he gladly left behind in the first of the 1914 Sonnets. This generalised sense of disillusion, which probably had an intimately personal source in his pathetic affair with Ka (2), is to be remedied by Holiness, in the company of a rather shadowy Love and very generalised Pain. Honour will regally reimburse his loyal subjects (the volunteers) with a 'royal wage' (which means what you feel it means something splendid!)

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(1) Rupert Brooke: 1914, Five Sonnets. Sonnet 111. London, 1915.

(2) Catherine Nesbitt, the actress.

This sestet ends with a climactic emotional burst of affirmation, though what Brooke affirms remains little more than a feeling that he has somehow linked up with a more splendid and heroic past.

Again,we talk of the immediate poetic tradition as if it was exlusively Georgian. But there were a number of viable 'traditions' available. There was the 'muscularity' of Kipling, Henley, Newbolt, Noyes, Spring Rice. Their impact on the war poetry was minimal, although, paradoxically, they were the poets who had celebrated the British soldier, the manly life, courage, war, Empire, the military virtues. It is worth noting, I think, that the Kiplingesque tradition holds on most strongly in the service least affected by the modern horrors of war, the Navy:

> There's a sea that lies uncharted far beyond the setting sun,
> And a gallant fleet was sailing there whose fighting days were done...(1)

or

> From the 'George' in Portsmouth High Street north to the Scottish shore
> The Post-chaise carried the message; twas in seventeen ninety-four.....(2)

Both rhythmically and thematically, the influence is patent(3).

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(1) Ronald Hopwood: 'The Old Way', MIA p.73.

(2) W.M. James : 'Undying Days', 1916. MIA p.82.

(3) See passim MIA, pp. 73 - 102.

The social realism of Masefield and Gibson had a marginal influence and the poetry of Hardy and Housman would come into its own. But the latter, with its irony rooted in a tension between simplicity of diction and form on the one hand and its themes on the other, had less impact in 1914 - 15. The first year of the war was not conscious of 'Life's Little Ironies' and indeed, it took a great deal of mud and blood to kill the old vaguely-articulated though sincerely held 'certainties'. Irony and satire had to wait till the dichotomy between the old values and the new doubts and despairs became irreconcileable.

The Imagists, Read, Wyndham Lewis, Aldington, Ford Madox Ford, would seem to have had the advantage of a technique that eschewed abstractions, and centred round the concrete image. But these poets were no more successful than the Georgians for the general reasons that Imagism failed: that is, it lacked dynamism. And the Imagists found that the horror of the war swamped technique, because of the urgency and starkness of their emotional commitment.

It was possible in 1939-45 to be a poet writing about war. Sidney Keyes, for example, was never so utterly swamped by his experience that he lost sight of Rilke, Yeats and Eliot. The literary tradition was stronger, the war less horrifying, the shock less unexpected. But most of the 1914-18 combatant poets were less fortunate. A critical concern for technique was swamped by the pressure and urgency of content. Poetry had a curative purpose not found in 1939-45. Thus, from the point of view of poetic technique, the interest lies in the shape that content dictated. Their commitment was to their immediate experience rather than to a literary tradition, and many poets would still regard this as valid:

> It is an outrage to a poem to think of it as such-and-such matter plus such-and-such form, or even as matter put into form. Form must not be thought of as a series of rigid moulds. All matter is to some extent informed to start with; and the very selection of matter is a formalistic activity... The relationship between form and matter is like a marriage; matter must find itself in matter.(1)

It is by an examination of the inter-relationship of changing matter and evolving form that we shall come to understand why it is that Sorley's poems are hardly touched by the rhetoric of his contemporaries, and why it is that Rosenberg's 'Trench Poems' have a clarity that much of his earlier poetry lacks. What made a minor pastoralist like Sassoon into the satiric voice of his generation? What led Kipling to channel his anguish after his son's death into terse epigrams? How do we explain Blunden's relative stability, or why Owen's less successful poems are those that, like 'The Letter' or 'The Dead Beat' were most influenced by his admiration of Sassoon?(2)

Even a superficial reading of these poets is enough to disprove the kind of flat-rate criticism that dismisses them as 'Georgians in Uniform'. As I have already said, not all were Georgians. And it only has even this limited application if we accept that anyone 'in uniform', is changed by his encountering the personal, social, moral and psychological pressures of which the uniform is only the symbol. Anyone who has worn khaki is modified by the experience. Mr. Punch saw the modification more as a transformation:

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(1) Louis MacNeice: The Poetry of W.B. Yeats, Oxford,1941. p.19.

(2) Wilfred Owen : CP, pp. 60 and 72.

> While the daily toll of life is heavy, War, shorn of its pomp and pageantry, drags wearily in the trenches. The Lovelace of today is a troglodyte, hiding his time patiently, but often a prey to ennui.(1)

When the Lovelace of today becomes a troglodyte, is he Lovelace? - that seems to be the question.

Hardened literary critical judgements can be unjust, and the accepted view that Georgianism is some fag-end of Romanticism, ignorant of the world around it and plying away in blinkers with an outworn poetic tradition, is manifestly inadequate. One can hardly say that H.S. Mackintosh was ignorant of all alternatives:

> When I am tired of Gertrude Stein
> ('She said she said that she said she..!')
> When the expressionistic line
> Has palled, and Sitwells weary me,
> When bored with psycho-prosody,
> Obscurist and grammaticaster.
> Give me that song of Picardy -
> 'He has been duped - the station-master!'(2)

The Georgians were, as C.K. Stead has shown,(3) involved in a literary controversy when the war intervened, a controversy which goes on rather less relevantly in Post-War literature(4). What the three principal parties in contention, the Edwardian, Imagist and Georgian, were concerned with was, basically, the social function of poetry.

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(1) Mr. Punch's History of The Great War. London, 1919. exerpt dated Jan.,1916. p. 70.

(2) H.S. Mackintosh:'Il Est Cocu, le Chef du Gare' BAWP. pp. 104 - 5.

(3) C.K. Stead: The New Poetic, London, 1964.

(4) vide, Roy Campbell's 'The Georgiad' Or Sitwell's 'The Jolly Old Squire, or Way Down in Georgia', 1922.

As the war progressed, however, there was a growing sense among the young poets, both Georgian and Imagist, of the inadequacy of poetry to deal with the magnitude of their experience. This is the basis of the re-iterated compartmentalisation of man - soldier - poet that characterises their verse.

> Your 'Youth' has fallen from its shelf,
> and you have fallen, you yourself,
> They knocked a soldier on the head,
> I mourn the poet who fell dead.(1)

Similarly, Blunden can describe himself as 'a harmless young shepherd in a soldier's coat.'(2) Quite early in the war, some were prepared to make distinctions between the activity of scribbling down ideas in verse, and what they conceived, perhaps, as the more formalistic activity of poetry. Sorley, when invited to publish his verse, replied: 'For three years, or the duration of the war, let be.'(3) Edgell Rickword, at least in theory, abdicated:

> Yes, there are many things we have not done,
> But its a sweat to knock them into rhyme,
> let's have a drink, and give the cards a run
> and leave dull verse to the dull peaceful time.(4)

Although Rickword's flippant reluctance to 'knock' experience 'into rhyme' seems markedly at variance with Rosenberg's intensity, both statements are simply manifestations of the same basic sense of inadequacy.

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(1) Isaac Rosenberg: 'Killed in Action.' BAWP. p. 128.

(2) Edmund Blunden: Undertones of War. London, 1929. p. 266.

(3) C.H. Sorley: Letters. dated July, 1915. Cambridge, 1919. p. 273.

(4) Edgell Rickword: 'The Soldier Addresses His Body' HUSS, pp. 111 - 2.

> I am determined that this war, with all its powers for devastation, shall not master my poeting; that is, if I am lucky enough to come through all right. I will not leave a corner of my consciousness covered up, but saturate myself with the strange and extraordinary new conditions of this life, and it will all refine itself into poetry later on.(1)

As Rosenberg's last statement suggests, the Wordsworthian concept of the poetic process was still current, but currently inadequate. There was no tranquillity in which emotion could be recollected or 'refined'. Some, of course, simply felt that with death so omnipresent, the business of staying alive seemed infinitely more urgent than writing poetry about it. Others were circumscribed by the idea that poetry was concerned with beauty (with a restricted notional view of 'beauty'), and the very lexis demanded by the physical actualities of their experience seemed to preclude poetry. It was the Somme, which he did not survive, that ultimately convinced Leslie Coulson of the inadequacy of Georgian attitudes and techniques:

> In other days I sang of simple things,
> Of summer dawn, and summer noon and night,
> The dewy grass, the dew-wet fairy rings,
> The Lark's long golden flight.
>
> Deep in the forest I made melody
> While squirrels cracked their hazel-nuts on high,
> Or I would cross the wet sand to the sea
> And sing to sea and sky.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> I played with all the toys the gods provide,
> I sang my songs and made glad holiday,
> Now I have cast my broken toys aside
> And flung my lute away.
>
> A singer once, I now am fain to weep.
> Within my soul I feel strange music swell,
> Vast chants of tragedy too deep - too deep
> For my poor lips to tell.(2)

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(1) Isaac Rosenberg: letter to Binyon, 1916. Works, p. 373.

(2) Leslie Coulson: 'From the Somme,' ULD p. 82.

In this poem, Coulson marks the end of pastoralism in First World War poetry, rising through the Georgian catalogue of the English countryside and the'am fains' to a fine rhetorical climax, where the magnificent dirge of 'Vast chants of tragedy' is splendidly, sadly prophetic.

It is illuminating here to mention Owen's similar rejection of similarly restricted poetic material. Owen, in the course of his trench experience, was to move through a number of attitudes towards poetic purpose. In'Insensibility', like many others, he rejects a definition of poetry that involves conventionally limited 'beauty', which adorns life. Thus, it is a vastly different thing to deal with the death of the seasons and the horrible death of men:

> The front line withers,
> But they are troops who fade, not flowers,
> For poets' tearful fooling.(1)

The ironic choice of 'withers' and 'fade' is a rejection of the very lexis of a pastoral-based poetry. And the implication of the concluding oxymoron is that poetry is some kind of 'fooling' that becomes irrelevant when 'tearful', when concerned with the human tragedy. In the same way, he can still introduce flashes of extravagant rhetoric as an ironic rejection, a parody, of poetic diction:

> My glorious ribbons? - Ripped from my own back
> In scarlet threads. (that's for your poetry book)(2).

Robert Graves, although he had in an early poem, 'A Renascence' seemed to agree with Synge's stricture that poetry had to become brutal again before it became relevant to life,

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(1) Owen: 'Insensibility'. C.P. London, 1964. p.37.

(2) Owen: 'A Terre.' C.P. London, 1964. p. 64.

Of their travailings and groans
Poetry is born again (1)

later recognised that the brualisation (by which he meant more than a Brookean lexical shift) was likely to be his personal tragedy as a poet:

Here's an end to my art!
I must die and I know it,
With battle murder at my heart -
Sad death for a poet!(2)

Ivor Gurney, like Rosenberg, decided to saturate himself, and wait:

And (my eyes) watching silent, the business of a poet(3)

There is indeed something pathetic in this line, when viewed against Gurney's own future years of insanity. In retrospect, Sir Herbert Read writes of his experience as an imagist in the trenches. Underlying his recollections are the same basic doubts and assumptions:

The War came, but that did not make any essential difference to our poetry. I myself wrote imagist poems in the trenches, and did not see any inconsistency in the act. War was one thing and poetry another; and if war was to be expressed in poetry, the imagist technique was as adequate as any other(4)

'War was one thing and poetry another'. Why should Read believe that there might be an inconsistency in writing imagist poems about war? Then there is the conditional 'if war was' to be dealt with in poetry, and the implied resignation of his last remark, which he might well have written 'as inadequate as any other'. It is a marvellously exact reconstruction of that sense of loss, despair, inadequacy that characterised the poets in 1916 and 1917.

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(1) Robert Graves : 'A Renascence.' Over the Brazier, London, 1916, p. 20.

(2) ibid : 'The Shadow of Death', Over the Brazier, p. 19.

(3) Ivor Gurney : 'Dirge for Two Striplings,' HUSS. p. 154.

(4) Herbert Read : 'The Present State of Poetry.' Kenyon Review I. 4 1939. p.360.

Since, of all the combatant poets, Read alone has enjoyed subsequent reputation as a literary critic, it is particularly relevant to examine his self-criticism as it pertains to his war poetry. A Homeric nod is to be found in his Annals of Innocence and Experience:

> The impact of war on my sensibility is best revealed in the change which came to my writing during the period... It was a change of content rather than of technique. In 1915 I was already writing in the imagist manner, and from the Front I sent to the Gryphon, the students' magazine at Leeds, various contributions of which the earliest must have been written within a few weeks of my war experience. They are, as imagist poems should be, coldly objective. The following is an impression of Ypres.

"With a chill and hazy light
the sun of a winter noon
swills
thy ruins,

Thy ruins etched
in silver silhouettes
against a turquoise sky.

Lank poles leap to the infinite,
their broken wires
tossed like the rat-locks of Macnades,
And Desolation broods over all,
gathering to her lap
her leprous children.

The sparrows whimper
amid the broken arches."

> ....towards the end of 1916 I find two poems which I called 'Truth for a Change - an Epilogue to the Fables.' In 1919 I apparently thought they were too sentimental to be included in Naked Warriors, but I reproduce one of them now as a contrast to the poem already quoted:

"Such a lad as Harry was
Isn't met with every day.
He walked the land like a god,
Exulting in energy,
Care-free,
His eyes a blue smile

Beneath his yellow curling locks;
And you'd wonder where a common labourer got
Those deep Rosetti lips
And finely carven nose...
I saw him stretch his arms
Languid as a dozing panther,
His face full to the clean sky -
When a blasted sniper laid him low;
He fell limp on the muddy boards
And left us all blaspheming."

> I do not suggest that from a literary critical point of view such relatively crude and sentimental realism is an improvement on the earlier idealism: indeed, if there is any difference of merit, I am inclined to think that the Ypres poem is better than 'Truth for a Change'. But I should not have thought so in 1916 - much less so in 1917 or 1918. My experience, that is to say, was modifying my literary values, and not altogether for the good... But this is not to deny that good poetry can be made out of emotional situations, and in so far as the war induced me to write about emotional situations, it meant an enlargement of my literary experience. (1)

Although I am, from the point of view of my thesis, indebted to the concession in the final paragraph quoted above, I must also point out that Read's generalisations about his personal achievement as a war poet are invalidated on two counts. First, there is his choice of illustrative material. Aside from 'The End of a War' (1933), which falls well outside my remit, (a philosophic poem which, in thematic terms required that the war be ended before it could be written) Read is the poet of 'Kneeshaw Goes to War' and 'The Execution of Cornelius Vane',(2) two of the most significant narrative poems written during the stress of active service.

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(1) Herbert Read: Annals of Innocence and Experience, London, 1940. See 'The Impact of War', pp. 143 - 5.

(2) Herbert Read: Collected Poems, London, 1966. pp 29 -33 & 40 - 44. These poems are considered in detail in Section III of this thesis.

One must question the validity of a self assessment that is based on a contrast of two poems that failed, and ignores the poet's major achievement on the subject of this war. And it is worth noting that 'Ypres' appears in his Collected Poems in a sub-section entitled 'Additional Poems from the Period of the First World War' (1) and 'Truth for a Change' Read has subsequently ignored altogether.

The second qualification I would wish to make would be in terms of the critical contrast itself. Read, as an Imagist, was committed to "the eternal aesthetic ideal - an ideal of form, indifferent to the nature of the subject matter,"(2) but found this was possible only when he was 'coldly objective.' This was possible, certainly, as in the 'Ypres' poem, written 'within a few weeks of my war experience.' I feel, however, that the change he perceived, 'a change of content rather than technique', he has not fully stated. What he has not recognized was that he was registering in his work not a fundamental shift in attitude to war, but a corresponding shift in his concept of poetic purpose. This is clearly indicated in the title of the latter poem, 'Truth for a Change.' It was also a change in his notional concept of 'truth', for he was now concerned not with the coldly objectified transcription of the perceived image but with a moral truth. Indeed, the failure of 'Truth for a Change' is in some measure due to Read's inability to square the imagist ideal with an explicit curative intent.

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(1) Herbert Read: Collected Poems, London, 1966. p.47.

(2) Herbert Read: 'The Present State of Poetry', Kenyon Review, I,4. London, 1939. p.360.

I think that this view gains support from the group of imagist poems entitled 'The Scene of War'(1) As in 'Ypres', and as implied in 'Scene', the emphasis is on the pictorial aspect, which the imagist technique could handle well to produce 'a static lyric'. When the pictorial element predominates Read can, with control, vividly suggest war's devastation.

> Here and there
> interior walls
> lie upturned and interrogate the skies amazedly.(2)

He suggests a topsy-turvy world, but with a clever suggestion through 'interrogate' and the location of 'amazedly', of a shocked surprise, a stunned bewilderment. When, however, as in 'The Happy Warrior' and 'Fear'(3) he tries to suggest that psychological stress produced by the trench conditions, he tends to substitute a harsh crude lexical notation for the image. Yet these seem, nevertheless, more compelling statements about war than, say, 'Aeroplanes',(4)which seems little more than a one-figure exercise in imagist theory where the subject-matter is of little consequence. It is maintained at an impersonal level because there is nothing intrinsic that commits the poet to other than a pictorial representation of a peripheral moment.

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(1) Herbert Read: Collected Poems, London, 1966. pp. 34 - 37.

(2) ibid: 'Villages Demolis', p. 34.

(3) ibid: p. 35.

(4) ibid: p. 38.

By the end of the war he had, in fact, rejected the neutral formalism of Imagism for 'emotion', as he himself indicated in 'Definitions towards a Modern Theory of Poetry'(1) Subsequently, he qualified this too, and explained how his combatant poems ultimately sought a balance between the formalism that was his aesthetic and a fierce moral indignation that fashioned his curative purpose.

> "As the war went on, year after year, and there seemed no escape from its indignity except death, some compromise between dream and reality became necessary. The only worthy compromise, I even then dimly realised, was a synthesis - some higher reality in which the freedom of the mind and the necessity of experience became reconciled. If I had been older that solution might have been a philosophy; but I was not contemplative enough for that, nor wise enough. I therefore sought the solution in art: in a poetry which would represent my aesthetic ideals and yet at the same time deal with the experience that threatened to overwhelm me. The result was a series of war poems, some of which I afterwards destroyed, but most of which I published in a small volume to which I gave the title Naked Warriors (2).

This synthesis led Read from the imagist poem to the narrative, and it is the precise nature of that transition I shall examine in Section III. At this point, let me be content to offer Read's comments as a salutary warning against a further major critical misconception, that what a poet has to say by way of self-depreciation must inevitably be true.

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(1) See Art and Letters, I, 3. London, 1918.

(2) Herbert Read: The Innocent Eye, London, 1947. p. 103. The volume, Naked Warriors, was published in 1919.

Against the self-depreciation, the sense of failure of these young poets, we must always be careful to place their actual achievement. There is an awareness of the unique problems consequent on the poets' physical commitment to the ardours and endurances of contemporary warfare, and a sensitive striving to find answers that suggests an evolving professionalism markedly different to the amateur dilettantism of their pre-war Georgian effusions. Many of the lesser talents were content to rough-hew their reactions to their situation, as experience outran technique. Yet even here, there is a progression from a cliche-ridden facile doggerel to a verse that, though still circumscribed by their personal limitations as poets, is hall-marked by an anger, a commitment, a sincerity, a bitterness, an anguish.

For those who were poets - Owen, Rosenberg, Blunden, Sassoon, Graves, Read, Sorley - there is a striving to attain that 'art' defined by Yeats:

> The Rhetorician would deceive his neighbours,
> The sentimentalist himself, while art
> Is but a vision of reality (1)

In the pre-war controversy, the Georgians had already opposed the attitudes and techniques implicit in Edwardian rhetoric, as indeed had the Imagist Movement. In reply, they themselves had become sentimentalists as we shall see in the next section. By 1916, their immediate concern was to present reality, a direct presentation that was a curative to the cherished illusions of the preceding generation and the apathy of the civilians.

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(1) Yeats : 'Ego Dominus Tuus.' C.P., 1952. p. 182.

Late in the war, the best of them struggled for form and technique that would permit them to unify their experience in 'a vision of reality'

It was this desire 'to create the universal', to originate a symbol out of the particular, 'the merely individual', to find 'a vision of reality' that turned Rosenberg's thoughts to the drama -

> If I am lucky, and come off undamaged, I mean to put all my innermost experiences into the 'Unicorn'. I want it to symbolise the war and all the devastating forces let loose by an ambitious and unscrupulous will (1)

and Sassoon's thoughts to something 'on a bigger scale':

> While at Lancaster Gate I was disquieted by a craving to be back on the Western Front as an independent contemplator. No longer feeling any impulse to write bitterly, I imagined myself describing it in a comprehensive way, seeing it like a painter and imbuing my poetry with Whitmanesque humanity and amplitude. From the routine-restricted outlook of battalion sectors I had seen so little, and the physical conditions were a perpetual hindrance to detached and creative vision. But I had experienced enough to feel confident that I could now do something on a bigger scale, and I wanted to acquire further material which would broaden and vitalise what was already in my mind. (2)

Both poets obviously felt that to achieve 'a vision of reality' they required a larger canvas than the lyric, or short narrative, or dramatic lyric, afforded. Implicit in their remarks is the acceptance of the notion of scale and scope we have already mentioned. The shaping force was to be an extension of form. Yet Owen's vision was achieved by the informing compassion that coloured and gave coherence to all he saw and wrote.

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(1) Isaac Rosenberg: Works, ed. Bottomley & Harding, p. 379.

(2) Siegfried Sassoon : Siegfried's Journey, New York, 1946, pp. 104 - 5.

For Owen realised instinctively that the 'vision of reality' that was art was not a representation of the real but one man's personal perception of it. If the rhetorician's aim was deception, and the sentimentalist's sin self-deception, the artist is the man who is true to what he sees, and presents it without intent to deceive others.

It was the pursuit of this reality that turned pastoralists into satirists (a not unprecedented juxtaposing of the real and ideal), that saw subjectivity give way to a desire for objectivity, the concrete replace the abstract, the colloquial clash with the stylised and the image with the generalisation, the socially conscious oust the introspective. In short, which saw the general movement of war poetry from 1914 - 18 follow a path not dissimilar to the movement of poetry outside the area of war. The tragedy was that too many ran out of time, or talent, or both.

SECTION II

Today the term 'Georgianism' is commonly used in literary criticism as a perjorative term for the worst refinements and preciosity of a diluted pastoralism, and the Georgian poets are considered dilettante in poetic purpose, 'week-ending' in the Home Counties. Critics vary in the intensity of their distaste. Professor Bullough saw the Georgian period as 'an Indian Summer of Romanticism' (1), but few have viewed it so kindly. Day Lewis dismissed it contemptuously as 'a period of very low vitality', and the poets as

> a sadly pedestrian rabble flocking along the roads
> their fathers had built, pointing out to each other
> the beauty spots and ostentatiously drinking small
> beer in a desperate effort to prove their virility.(2)

The combination of wit and authority has proved damaging especially when counterpointed by the rather sanguine introduction to the Georgian anthologies by Sir Edward Marsh:

> This volume is issued in the belief that English
> poetry is now once again putting on a new strength
> and beauty.(3)

Whatever it was doing, it was not doing this, and the assumption has been that it therefore was doing nothing. But it was. In its way, Georgianism was reacting to that debasement of the poetic function that was also the raison d'etre of Imagism.

C.K. Stead (4) has done much to dispel facile notions that the

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(1) Geoffrey Bullough: The Trend of Modern Poetry, Edinburgh,1934, p. 62.

(2) C. Day Lewis: A Hope for Poetry, Cambridge, 1934. p.2.

(3) Sir Edward Marsh: prefactory note to the Georgian Anthology, 1911 - 12. London,1912.

(4) C.K.Stead: The New Poetic, London, 1964.

Georgians were just the fag-end of a dying tradition, and traces the part they played in the perhaps abortive struggle between Edwardians, Imagists and Georgians. Professor Daiches is also fair in that he tries to examine the Georgian achievement in a socio-historical context:

> The Georgians adapted an eclectic traditionalism, limited, refined, carefully hedged round, and within these confines sang softly but confidently.(1)

But while I accept his conclusion that the Marsh anthologies were a defence mechanism against creeping urbanisation, he fails, I think, to see Georgianism as a part of the general technical movement of the time.

To try to understand what this was, I think we have to understand the Georgian poet's dilemma. The Edwardian poets - Kipling, Henley, Newbolt, Noyes, Spring Rice, Austin Dobson - had reacted against the Decadence, and tried with some desperation to restore that sense of self-sufficiency that they saw to hall-mark the Victorians, an insular pride that Aestheticism and later the Boer War had seemed to diminish. So they were often aggressively nationalistic, jingoistic, patriotic. Much of what they wrote was rhetoric, propagandist rhetoric. On the credit side many of them were very professional, versatile, and at the time, popular. They had no sympathy with notions of the poet as 'the idle singer of an idle day'. William Morris, though an advocate of social reform, had rigidly excluded his reforming zeal from his poetry:

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(1) Professor David Daiches: Poetry and the Modern World. Chicago, 1946, p. 40.

Why should I strive to set the crooked right?
Let it suffice me that my murmuring rhyme
Beats with light wing against the ivory gate,
Telling a tale not too importunate
To those who in the sleepy region stay
Lulled by the singer of an empty day.(1)

This dissociation of life and literature was as alien to the Edwardians as it was to the Victorians. Poetry, for them, must be more than mere word-spinning, more than an end in itself.

Just as major modernists like Pound, Yeats, Eliot, drew strength from the Symbolists, so both Imagists and Georgians derived from the 1890's a sense of form:

...After the great and often untidy expansiveness of the major Victorian poets... the poets of the 1890's rediscovered, through deliberately narrowing their scope... the possibilities of economy, of the working out in a short poem of a single mood.(2).

The tragedy of many Georgians was that they inherited the sense of form and economy indicated here by Fraser but could not shake off completely the idea of the poet as verbal anaesthetist implicit in Morris. Hence the continued attraction of folk-lore, Chimborazo and Cotopaxi, and the Golden Road to Samarkand. It was a kind of 'murmuring rhyme' that neither wakened nor disturbed.

Yet the Georgians wanted poetry and life to meet, they wanted the popularity the Edwardians enjoyed, but they wanted it without the rhetorical dogmatism and swinging rhythms that wooed it.

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(1) William Morris : 'The Earthly Paradise, An Apology.'

(2) G.S. Fraser : The Modern Writer and His World, Revised Pelican Edition, 1964. p.249.

The fact that both Imagists and Georgians were concerned to make their attitudes clear in literary manifestos is surely indicative of a desire to bring people and poetry back into contact. Both schools of thought reacted against the tub-thumping and sabre-rattling of the Edwardians. But the bases of their opposition differed, and the measures they took consequently differed radically. At the risk of over-simplification, I see the conflict of Edwardians and Imagists as being over poetic language, the concrete versus the abstraction. Where the Georgians differed was in tone, replacing the aggressive stridency of the Edwardian with a studied simplicity and muted lyricism. Both Georgians and Imagists sought to achieve economy by the short poem that explored a single mood. The Imagists thought this a matter of technique: The Georgians limited themselves thematically and narrowed the scope of poetry. Both produced what Prof. Daiches (discussing Georgian poetry) called 'a static lyric'. (1)

Some of the Georgians, like de la Mare or Graves, narrowed scope by withdrawal into a folkish yet magic world; others withdrew into academic preoccupation. Bridges'translation of the Aeneid, where he is mainly concerned to naturalise the quantitative hexameter, Sturge Moore's variations on Rimbaud, Binyon, R.C. Trevelyan - in all there is the distinctive academic flavour of the British Museum.

Yet when we talk of Georgianism we do not mean either of these retreats. The characteristic withdrawal of the Georgians was into 'nature', where they could evade the unpleasantness of an increasingly mechanised world, and from which, they felt, the traditional strength of English poetry derived.

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(1) David Daiches : Poetry and the Modern World, Chicago, 1946. see pp. 38 - 39.

Here, they felt, they could find that wider audience they sought, without being slickly commercial, without abandoning Romantic concepts of the poetic sensibility, without reducing poetry to a subservience to moral or political didacticism. Unfortunately, by the poetic sensibility they often meant their natural eclecticism not untinged by a careful amateurism. And so they cultivated 'scenes and moods of the countryside' as their theme, and fashioned a style that, in tone, suggested a deliberate prosiness.

It is this area that concerns me most. It was not only the most characteristic expression of the Georgian sensibility; it was also the tradition that carried over most powerfully to the war, and that was, in turn, most dramatically transmuted by contact with the realities of trench experience.

As for the Georgian achievement in general, if we can regard in general such diverse poets as Lascelles Abercrombie, Bottomley, Brooke, Davies, Drinkwater, Flecker, W.W. Gibson, Masefield, Harold Munro, Turner, James Stephens and J.C. Squire, let me say that I accept the summation of that achievement as set out by Professor Bullough:

> Georgian Poetry...cannot be dismissed as an ineffectual anachronism. It is true that its poets were minor figures; that its achievement lay mainly in the short lyric; that it eschewed philosophy, satire, the 'sublime', that its forms were traditional. Poetry... is ever an affair of individualities, and we have no right to depreciate a poet, or a group of poets, because they comment on their age by negative implication rather than by direct statement. Mr. Edward Marsh was justified in perceiving a freshness of outlook among his contributors. For a time the Georgians revitalised naturalism, and if they lacked the intellectual powers of Wordsworth and Shelley, they gave to the romantic stream a new turn which was really enforced by the contemporary situation. So long as man loves the world about him, so long as he remains sensitive to the life and forms of nature,

> so long as he has moods of mild meditation, whimsical self-analysis, revulsion against town and social shackles, poetry of the Georgian kind will satisfy a vital need. Nor must we ignore the diversity of their technical accomplishment, their facility in stanza-forms, their loosening of verse. The experiments of such poets as Mr. Abercrombie and Edward Thomas in the approximation of diction and movement to those of ordinary conversation were expressive of their homely simplicity, and of the general lowering of poetic pitch that marks our age from its predecessors. Such a lowering of pitch demands the utmost economy and pregnancy. The Georgians frequently confused the lyric with current and garrulous forms of the essay. They fell into the banal and trivial in sentiment and imagery, the prosaic in rhythm. But the value of their experiments in a familiar poetry of commonplace incident lit by fancy, and their tentative probing of conscious thought-processes, is insufficiently recognised today.(1)

In 1934 this was a uniquely fair assessment. It has taken criticism thirty years to catch up with it.(2)

Georgian 'Pastoralism' was a poetry of simple thoughts and reflections in a rustic setting; at its best it produced a quiet and modulated lyricism, epitomised perhaps in the almost naive purity of W.H. Davies:

> My head thrown back, my face doth shine,
> Like yonder sun's, but warmer mine.
> A butterfly - from who knows where -
> Comes with a stagger through the air,
> And, lying down, doth ope and close
> His wings, as babies work their toes...(3)

As we shall discover later(4) the butterfly could find itself in stranger and more macabre circumstances.

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(1) Geoffrey Bullough: The Trend of Modern Poetry, Edinburgh, 1934, pp.62 - 63.

(2) See recent comments by James Reeves, Georgian Poetry, Middlesex, 1962. London, 1967. C.K. Stead, The New Poetic, London, 1964, and R.H. Ross, The Georgian Revolt, London, 1967.

(3) W.H. Davies: 'Easter', Georgian Poetry, 1916-17, Vol.III, London, 1917, p.160.

(4) See this section, p. 58.

Thematically, Masefield's 'London has been my prison' is in some ways archetypal.(1) City life was a regrettable necessity, the machine age a conception without grandeur. In retrospect, we see that much of their pastoralism was simply an evasion of, perhaps an inability to deal with, the real modern world. We see also that the social function of poetry, which the Georgians felt the Edwardians had abused, had gained no contemporary direction. Poetry was now too much an end in itself, a weekend escape route for the poet's sensibility. Harold Monro's 'poetic life' lasted from Friday night until Monday morning:

> Pack up the house, and close the creaking door
> The fields are dull this morning in the rain.
> It's difficult to leave that homely floor.
> Wave a light hand; we will return again.
> (What was that bird?) Goodbye, ecstatic tree,
> Floating, bursting, and breathing in the air.
> The lonely farm is wondering that we
> can leave. How every window seems to stare!
> That bag is heavy. Share it for a bit.
> ...It is over. Now we sit
> Reading the morning paper in the sound
> Of the debilitating heavy rain.
> London again, again. London again. (2)

The poet may regret his return to 'London again, again.' But after that 'Goodbye, ecstatic tree' the reader is glad to return to the Big Smoke.

To both Edwardians and Georgians pastoralism was a disguise for patriotism. Alfred Austin, the Laureate, adopted all the worst excesses of a hackneyed diction and a stale rhetoric. Mother England and Mother Nature had become synonyms; 'Poetry' and 'Nature' meant much the same thing. It was the inevitable 'mix' when a worn pastoralism and a desperate nationalism met:

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(1) John Masefield : C.P. London, 1928 , p. 59, for 'London Town'.

(2) Harold Monro: 'Week-end', Georgian Poetry, Vol.III. London, 1917. pp. 82-86.

Because our dear Mother, the fair Past,
On whom twin Hope and Memory safely lean,
And from whose fostering wisdom none shall wean
Their love and faith, while love and faith shall last:
Mother of happy homes and Empire vast,
Of hamlets meek, and many a proud demesne,
Blue spires of cottage smoke 'mong woodlands green,
And comely altars where no stone is cast.
And shall we barter these for gaping Throne,
Dismantled towers, mean plots without a tree,
A herd of hinds too equal to be free,
Greedy of other's, jealous of their own,
And where sweet Order now breathes cadenced tone,
Envy, and hate, and all uncharity.(1)

Habits of thought die hard, especially in versifiers of such poor quality. Even rhetorical electioneering like this dresses up political puerilities in terms of the pastoral convention. People are 'hinds', and the fate of England under contemporary radical movements would be to lose its trees and have its towers dismantled.

But I think it is worth noting even this early a distinction we can make. The word 'England' is an emotive symbol in rhetoric; its use rests less easily in a modulated lyricism. In Edwardian hands, the word became a trumpet whence they blew soul-animating strains, alas, too often:

There is a song of England that thrills the
beating blood
With burning cries and yearning
Tides of hidden aspiration hardly known or
understood;
Aspirations of the creature
Tow'rds the unity of Nature;
Sudden chivalries revealing whence the longing
is renewed
In the men that live for England, live and love
and die for England:
By the light of their desires
They shall blindly blunder higher,
To a wider, grander Kingdom, and a deeper
nobler good.(2)

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(1) Alfred Austin : 'Why England is Conservative', 1914 HUSS.p.10

(2) Alfred Noyes : 'A Song of England', PPER p.135. See also Kipling's 'The English Flag', P.85. ibid, & W.E. Henley's 'England' p. 70. ibid.

Kipling differed in that he enlarged the symbol to include the Empire.

Although both Georgians and Edwardians shared this patriotism, the way they chose to express it differed. Where the Edwardians generalised 'England' into a rhetorical clarion-call, the Georgians localised theirs and the consequent regionalism, the quieter 'Little England' of their pastoralism, accorded more with the quiet prosaic music of their tone.

Thus it is interesting to note that Rupert Brooke, despite his pre-war rejection of an aureate diction, despite his pursuit of realism and the lexical shift evident in such poems as 'Channel Crossing', could not withstand the emotional pressures of 1914. The symbol of his patriotism again becomes 'England'. In 'The Soldier' he sees his possible death as a fine patriotic gesture, and the justification for the gesture lies in that he is a 'child' of England:

> There shall be
> In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;
> A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,
> Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,
> A body of England's, breathing English air,
> Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home. (1)

There is not only a reversion to a rhetoric, but even in this short quotation where 'England' is mentioned three times and 'English' once, a reversion to the un-Georgian generalisation of the symbol. The lexis - 'bore', 'made aware', 'a body of England's' - is indicative of Brooke's concept of England as formative, almost in the biological sense.

It is hardly surprising that an attitude of mind and a technique that had successfully evaded the unpleasant truth of a modern

(1) Rupert Brooke :'The Soldier' Dec. Sonnets. 1915. Poetical Works ed. Keynes, London 1946, p.23.

mechanised world should find no difficulty, at least initially, in avoiding the unpleasantness of a mechanised war. Much of what we have defined as Georgian pastoralism was simply transported across the English Channel where the idealisation of pastoral Gloucestershire or Cambridgeshire gained impetus from distance. The young Georgians simply packed their regionalism in their kit-bags. And when they found 'dust and corpses in the thistles' above the Becourt road, the mind switched easily back to Monmouthsire:

> But I'm with you up at Wyndcroft,
> Over Tintern on the Wye. (1)

A very minor Georgian, Geoffrey Howard, expresses similar sentiments extended into the generalisation, which perhaps had its roots in the recruitment of local regiments, that the men from each locality are fighting for 'their England':

> Malvern men must die and kill
> That wind may blow on Malvern Hill;
> Devonshire blood must fall like dew
> That Devonshire's bays may yet be blue...(2)

It is sentimental and doggerel. There is no reason why the death of Malvern men should have repercussions in the weather. It is poor imagery, lacking any shaping control. We find the same attitudes, and a similar school magazine competence in every anthology. Only the region differs:

> There's a waterfall I'm leaving
> Running down the rocks in foam,
> There's a pool for which I'm grieving
> Near the water-ouzel's home,
> And it's there that I'd be lying
> With the heather close at hand
> And the curlews faintly crying
> Mid the wastes of Cumberland. (3).

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(1) Ford Madox Ford: 'The Iron Music', BAWP. p.98.

(2) Geoffrey Howard: 'Without Shedding of Blood'. BAWP. p.95.

(3) Nowell Oxland: 'Outward Bound', ULD. p. 57.

As late as March, 1916, but before the Somme Offensive, Wyndham Tennant in Belgium can celebrate finding a garden that is somehow English:

> Hungry for spring, I bent my head,
> The perfume fanned my face,
> And all my soul was dancing
> In that little lovely place,
> Dancing with a measured step from
> wrecked and shattered towns
> Away ... upon the Downs.(1)

The war is peripheral, generalised 'wrecked and shattered towns'; the reality is across the English Channel. The language is re-assuring cliches, 'perfume fanned my face', 'my soul was dancing', 'little lovely' 'with a measured step', and the only authentic stylistic touch is in the punctuation and syntax of the last line, a grand gesture of escape:

> Away ... upon the Downs.

The concept of Mother England similarly informed a great deal of early war poetry. Francis Brett Young is even more explicit than Brooke:

> England I saw, the mother from whose side
> He came hither and died, she at whose hems
> he had played,
> In whose quiet womb his body and soul were
> made,
> That pale estranged flesh that we bowed over
> Had breathed the scent in summer of white clover;
> Dreamed her cool fading nights, her twilights
> long,
> And days as careless as a blackbird's song.(2)

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(1) E. Wyndham Tennant: 'Home Thoughts in Laventie', MIA p. 10.

(2) Francis Brett Young: 'On a Subaltern Killed in Action', BAWP, pp. 171 - 4.

Even the 'pale estranged flesh' can be the trigger for pastoral rhapsody and reminiscence. Ivor Gurney's England is a typically Georgian matriarch whose features are 'little', 'shy', and 'tiny':

> Your hills not only hills, but friends of mine
> and kindly,
> Your tiny knolls and orchards hidden beside the
> river
> Muddy and strongly flowing, with sky and tiny
> streamlets
> Safe in its bosom ...
> Think on me too, O Mother, who wrest my soul to
> serve you
> In strange and fearful ways beyond your circling
> waters;
> None but you can know my heart, its tears and
> sacrifice,
> None, but you, repay.(1)

In a poem by Dyneley Hussey this mother-son relationship (and it is no part of my thesis to speculate on how much this pastoralising technique was given further strength by the public school background of many of these young poets) is continued after death. His consoling injunction to a dead young soldier is to

> Sleep on, pure youth, sleep at Earth's soothing
> breast.(2)

This kind of facile pastoralism can make nonsense of the war because it disguises, glosses over, all the realities - the reality of death, the reality of purpose in fighting the war. Thus a poet can not only dismiss the war as being fought by Englishmen for 'grass on English hills', but can fancifully make a euphemism of death by the expectation that a year after death the grass over the grave will have become somehow 'English':

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(1) Ivor Gurney: 'Strange Service', MIA pp. 14 - 15.

(2) Dyneley Hussey: 'Ode to a Young Man, died June, 1915'. MIA p. 132.

A year hence may the grass that waves
O'er Englishmen in Flemish graves
Coating this clay with green of peace
And softness of a year's increase,
Be kind and lithe as English grass
To bend and nod as the winds pass;
It was for grass on English hills
These bore too soon the last of ills.(1)

It is my intention in the next section to deal with death and its euphemisms. Suffice it at this point to note that such euphemisms as 'the last of ills', are only tenable in a context where they will pass unnoticed.

Rupert Brooke, of course, both thematically and technically, was most influential in shaping the poetry of the young combatant poets. His December Sonnets set the moral tone of 1915 verse. But his pre-war poetry, 'The Great Lover' and 'The Old Vicarage Grantchester', (2) was the model for most of the pastoral patriotism. 'The Old Vicarage' is redolent with patriotism but Brooke, catching himself out, as it were, mutes the patriotism with a pleasing whimsy and jocularity. In F.W. Harvey's 'Gonnehen' we find the nostalgia without the redeeming deftness:

....And then at morn
On rising from deep sleep saw dangle -
Shining in the sun to spangle
The all-blue heaven - bunchloads of red
Bright cherries which we bought to eat,
Dew-wet, dawn-cool, and sunny sweet.
There was a tiny courtyard too,
Wherein one shady walnut grew,
Unruffled peace the farm encloses
I wonder if beneath that tree
The meditating hen still be.

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(1) I.A. Williams: 'From a Flemish Graveyard' ULD. p.47.

(2) Poetical Works of Rupert Brooke : ed. Keynes. London, 1946. pp. 30 - 32, 67 - 72.

> Are the white walls now gay with roses?
> Does the small fountain yet run free?
> I wonder if the dog still dozes.
> Some day we must go back to see.(1)

One feels that all that is required are enquiries about the church clock and whether there's honey still for tea. It is the mould - the combination of catalogued 'sights and sounds' with a reiterated emphasis on 'tiny' and 'small'.

Eliot's observations on this point are extremely pertinent:

> One of the ways by which contemporary verse has tried to escape the rhetorical, the abstract, the moralising, to recover the accents of direct speech, is to concentrate its attention on trivial or accidental or commonplace objects.(2)

Speaking specifically about the Georgians he comments:

> ....it is not unworthy to notice how often the word 'litte' occurs; and how this word is used, not merely as a piece of information, but with a caress, a conscious delight.(3)

In 1917 this was not only an acute but a very fair critical observation. I can only ask, with how much more of 'a caress, a conscious delight' were such epithets employed in the trenches. Pre-war, this had been the Georgian reaction to the big rhetorical strident boom of Edwardianism. Now, perhaps, it set itself more against the vastness of the Prussian war machine, and the general vastness of the war devastation. But it was that same gesture with which Brooke had preferred the 'unofficial English rose' to the disciplined Berlin tulips when sitting in the Cafe des Westens (4) in 1912.

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(1) F.W. Harvey : 'Gonnehen', BAWP. p. 85.

(2) T.S. Eliot : 'Reflections on Contemporary Poetry'. The Egoist, September, 1917.

(3) ibid.

(4) Rupert Brooke : 'The Old Vicarage, Grantchester'. Poetical Works. ed. Keynes. London, 1946. p.68.

It stemmed from a genuine love of 'the English way of life', from a preference for the amateur rather than the professional.

The Georgian patriotic spirit set against all-comers the quiet unpretentious strength of England. Against this strength the glory that was Nineveh's, the pomp of Tyre and Babylon were nought.(1) There was no rhetoric in their patriotism. They broke England down into its regions, then into its idyllic component parts - by-ways, woodlands, hamlets, brooks, paths - and celebrated these quietly and with a simplicity of language:

> Whatever way I turn I find
> The path is old unto me still.
> The hills of home are in my mind
> And there I wander as I will.(2)

It was a habit of mind that could transport a medical officer in the R.A.M.C. from the 'reek of iodine and blood' in East Africa to 'the room I love where the ivy-cluster shakes its dew' (3). It could equally well lead an Imagist poet into sounding very Georgian. Richard Aldington, during his training, admits to lacking that singleness of purpose that attends the good soldier:

> I am 'to fire at the enemy column
> After is has passed' -
> But my obsolete rifle, loaded with 'blank'
> Lies untouched before me.
> My spirit follows after the gliding clouds,
> And my lips murmur of the mother of beauty
> Standing breast-high, in golden broom
> Among the blue pine-woods.(4)

It was a very Georgian position to be in.

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(1) See, for example, Geoffrey Howard's 'England', BAWP, p. 97.

(2) Francis Ledwidge: 'In France', BAWP, p. 102.

(3) Francis Brett Young: 'After Action', ULD.p.62. See also W.N. Hodgson, 'Release', MIA. pp. 42 - 3. and C.H. Sorley, 'German Rain' BAWP. p.147 for interesting effects of the pastoralising habit.

(4) Richard Aldington : 'Field Manoeuvres'. ULD, p. 15.

The natural Georgian predilection to expend their poetic energies on the pastoral descriptive was reinforced by their understandable nostalgia for home, heightened in turn by the very fine summer of 1914 that they remembered. The habit was difficult to abandon:

> Ah! we have dwelt in Arcady long time
> With sun and youth eternal round our ways
> And in the magic of that golden clime
> We loved the pageant of the passing days.(1)

So, indeed, it must have seemed!

It could not last, however. There is a reality for every ideal, and many of these young poets began to grow aware of the contrasts between nature's order and man's chaos, between man's insanity and nature's sanity, between the idealised pastoralism they had packed in their kit-bags and the new Nature of rat, louse and dirt they encountered. The old Romantic harmony of Man and Nature was less enthuiastically endorsed. In nature, as elsewhere, it must have seemed that evil was replacing good, the ugly superseding the beautiful.

As early as 1915 Mr. Punch detected a certain waning of the pastoral habit. In March of that year he commented:

> Spring poets are suffering from suspended animation; there is a slump in crocuses, snowdrops, daffodils and lambkins. Their 'musings always turn away to men who're arming for the fray.' The clarion and the fife have ousted the pastoral ode.(2)

Mr. Punch erred only in that he was a little ahead of schedule. Pastoralism was still very much the poetic attitude in 1915. But it had ceased to be an end in itself.

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(1) W.N. Hodgson : 'The Call'. ULD, p. 9.

(2) Mr. Punch's History of the Great War. London, 1919. p. 30.

Questions were asked, doubts were expressed. The Georgian catalogue of 'sights and sounds' of the countryside was used to point a pertinent question:

> The cropping cattle, the swallow's wing,
> The wagon team and the pasture spring,
> Move in their seasons and are most wise,
> But man, whose image is in the skies,
> Who is master of all, whose hand achieves
> The Church and the barn and the homestead eaves -
> How are the works of his wisdom seen
> In the year of our Lord nineteen-fifteen? (1)

The cyclic inevitability of nature is set against man's contemporary situation. The divinity of man, 'who is master of all', does not prevent his'wisdom' from suffering by contrast with the patterned harmonies of the natural order which 'are most wise'. Similarly, the Romantic view of man as a logical being in a natural order of instinctive creatures is given a new application:

> Strange that this bird sits here and sings
> While we must only sit and plan -
> Who are so much the higher things -
> The murder of our fellow man. (2)

This is too cliche-ridden to aspire to poetry, and it is difficult to know whether the parenthesis is ironic or despairing hope, but Mackintosh, while he contrasts 'sit and sing' and 'sit and plan', to separate rational man from the instinctive but joyous creature, holds back the bitter irony till the last line in a way that anticipates Sassoon. But it loses impact through its failure to rise above the hackneyed expression.

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(1) John Drinkwater : '1915', ULD. p. 77.

(2) E.A. Mackintosh : 'A Listening Post', ULD. p. 33.

Closely linked with this idea, as the old harmony seems invalid - ated, is the growing insistence on man's transience and impotence. There is no 'man harrowing clods' to 'go onward the same, though Dynasties pass.' (1) Graves made clever use of this in a poem that gathers together several contemporary 'strands'. There is a new bitterness about the escape mechanism from the harsh realities of the Front to the pastoral sights and sounds. Then the rather sentimentalised picture of home leads up to the cyclic inevitability of nature which is 'contemptuous of the distant cry' of the soldier. Not only does Graves remind us of the Hardyesque harmony that is gone, but his pun on the word 'harrow' in the last line places the countryman in the context of the war's destruction and the anguish of the combatants:

> And what of home - how goes it boys,
> While we die here in stench and noise?
> Meadows yet show
> Alternate white of drifted snow
> And daisies. Children play at shop,
> Warm days, on the flat boulder-top,
> With wildflower coinage, and the wares
> Are bits of glass and unripe pears.
> Crows perch upon the backs of sheep,
> The wheat goes yellow: women reap,
> Autumn winds ruffle brook and pond,
> Flutter the hedge and fly beyond.
> So the first things of nature run,
> And stand not still for anyone,
> Contemptuous of the distant cry
> Wherewith you harrow earth and sky. (2)

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(1) Thomas Hardy : 'In Time of The Breaking of Nations'. ULD. p. 78.

(2) Robert Graves : 'Country at War', HUSS. p. 67.

Such intellectual questionings were as alien to Imagist theory as they were to Georgian evasion, for the techniques of both were geared neither to such questionings nor to the expression of a harsh realism. Imagist poetry was at its best when it etched meaningfully the static moment, and derived its significance from the selection and arrangement of its images:

> The white body of the evening
> Is torn into scarlet,
> Slashed and gouged and seared
> Into crimson,
> And hung ironically
> With garlands of mist.
>
> But the wind
> Blowing over London from Flanders
> Has a bitter taste. (1)

When, however, Aldington is led to question the nature of things, he uses vers libre, and tends to use it with a laxity that breeds formlessness. His pre-war Images, (1910 - 15), had suggested that he did not rest easily under Imagist restraints. He found, in France,

> Making for myself hokku
> Of the moon and the flowers and of the snow.(2)

was an evasion of that reality, that questioning, that new poetic purpose with which poets were having to come to grips. His Images of War, (1919) show not only the progressive abandonment of the Romantic certainties about man's relationship with the natural order, but his inability to hold the cadence from disintegration. His questions are those of the young Georgians, but he is no more able to sustain technique than they were:

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(1) Richard Aldington: 'Sunsets', ULD. p. 109.

(2) Richard Aldington : CP. London, 1948. 'Living Sepulchres', p.86.

Night after night the Pleiades sing
And Orion swings his belt across the sky.
Night after night the frost
Crumbles the hard earth.
Soon the spring will drop flowers
And patient creeping stalk and leaf
Along these barren lines
Where the huge rats scuttle
And the hawk shrieks to the carrion crow.
Can you stay them with your noise?
Then kill winter with your cannon,
Hold back Orion with your bayonets
And crush the spring leaf with your armies! (1)

Some of the Imagistic touches are acceptable. But this poem lacks the severe formalism that underwrites all good vers libre.

As the war progressed, the pressure on these young poets accumulated, a pressure to confront the reality of the 'nature' which was their new environment. In effect, this meant acknowledging the presence of rat, louse, dirt and mud in a world without cuckoo, hare or daffodil. What it involved was the gradual substitution of a new equation, 'ugliness = truth', for the old Romantic equation of beauty and truth. In itself, this implied no more than a massive lexical shift, because it was a simple inversion of the old attitude to nature - and indeed would involve no more until there was a shift in the attitude to poetic purpose.

An interesting signpost at the crossroads of lexical change is Herbert Asquith's 'After the Salvo':

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(1) Richard Aldington : 'In the Trenches', MWMA. p. 106.

> Up and down, up and down,
> They go, the gray rat, and the brown,
> A skull, torn out of the graves nearby,
> Gapes in the grass. A butterfly,
> In azure irridescence new,
> Floats into the world, across the dew,
> Between the flow'rs. (1)

It would be injudicious to write off as fortuitious that this extract falls into three parts, both as regards lexis and rhythmic pattern. The first couplet has a nursery-rhyme simplicity, a strong rhythm accentuated by a strong end-rhyme. This is followed by an image of horror, with a violent lexis, 'gapes', 'torn out', the sort of detail common enough in post-Somme poetry. Here the lexis does the work, and rhythm and rhyme are secondary, the rhyme, indeed, being transferred to the third part. With the butterfly, in this last part, we see restored the pastoral lexis - 'butterfly', 'azure', 'irridescence', 'floats', 'dew'. This short extract anticipates a similar juxtaposing in All Quiet on the Western Front, more than a decade later;

> One morning two butterflies play in front of our trench, They are brimstone-butterflies, with red spots on their yellow wings. What can they be looking for here? There is not a plant nor a flower for miles. They settle on the teeth of a skull. (2)

Or later still, when the device was cleverly employed as a symbol, in the filmed version when Paul stretches out his hand towards the butterfly, a thing of beauty in a world of horror, and is killed so doing.

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(1) Herbert Asquith : 'After the Salvo'. ULD. p. 81.

(2) Erich Maria Remarque : All Quiet on the Western Front. London, 1929. p. 142.

Such juxtaposing is based on an awareness of and statement of contrast. The use of pastoralism as a symbol for patriotism was invalidated when the Georgian tradition foundered on the rock of the realities of No Man's Land, when patriotism lost its initialidealism, and when such direct symbolism was replaced by techniques and devices that relied on the growing sense of contrast. As we have seen, a symbol of this kind operated within a general consent, naturally typifying or representing something by possession of analagous qualities or by association in fact or thought. But it was no longer possible to assign, for example, maternal and formative attributes to nature when nature was patently hostile or indifferent to man, when it was ugly and cruel. In such descriptions of the soldiers' contemporary environment as continue after July, 1916, we see the continued lexical shift from the beautiful to the harshly ugly, but we see developing with these techniques that are rooted in contrast -irony, satire - and pastoral description as a symbol for patriotism is replaced by its use as metaphor, (similarly rooted in contrast) though the contrast is a fundamentally different one from that behind the satire and irony. The pastoral tradition, as it was typified by the young Georgian poets, did not survive the Somme. It had been an emotional euphemism, it had been an evasion of the technological and urban reality, it had been often an end in itself. By 1916 the pendulum was swinging towards a bitter confrontation of reality, towards an emotional hyperbole, and to a social purpose that was, at times, unreservedly propagandist and committed.

Let us examine by way of illustration three indices of this shift - the substitution of No Man's Land for the Georgian regionalism, the substitution of 'harvest' imagery for the accepted 'little England' imagery, and the contemporary uses of the old Romantic pathetic fallacy.

John Harris in his historical account of the Somme has painted graphically the world of horror that was the poets' new 'countryside':

> Plagued by lice, they lived amid the awful debris of war - dead transport animals, wire, bombs, empty tins, rags, broken rifles, rounds of ammunition, mess-tins, bits of leather and webbing, broken British and German steel helmets, iron stakes and even skulls picked clean by the rats. Here and there were improvised graves, and occasionally an unwary foot, treading in the earth of the trench floor, would disturb hundreds of white maggots. They had seen men weeping as they struggled through the grey-white mud which grew worse with every day, and seen corpses used as parapets and even doorsteps..(1)

This description corresponds closely with Sassoon's account of a world:

> All ruts and stones and sludge, and the emptied dregs
> Of battle thrown in heaps. Here where they died
> Are stretched big-bellied horses with stiff legs;
> And dead men, bloody-fingered from the fight,
> Stare up at caverned darkness winking white. (2)

It is a drab world, grey, brown, khaki, mud, broken with occasions of red, black and white. The red may be blood or a glowing cigarette-tip, the white of Somme clay, a bleached bone, Verey light or maggots, the black of night or a dried wound. In 'A Working Party', for example:

> White faces peer, puffing a point of red..
> A flare went up, the shining whiteness spread..
> the slow silver moment died in dark
> ..a flare
> Gave one white glimpse of No Man's Land and wire. (3)

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(1) John Harris : The Somme, London, 1966. See pp. 73 - 4. Also pp. 76 - 88, pp. 100 - 109.

(2) Siegfried Sassoon : 'A Working Party', CP. p. 19.

(3) Siegfried Sassoon : 'A Working Party', CP. p. 19.

Owen shares a similar view. His world is not only drab, but ravaged by disease, now a dead thing:

> .... a sad land, weak with sweats of death,
> Gray, cratered like the moon with hollow woe,
> And pitted with great pocks and scabs of plagues.(1)

British and German patrols are like gray and brown caterpillars and,

> By them had slimy paths been trailed and scraped
> Round myriad warts that might be little hills. (2)

Two or three years previously they might well indeed have been 'little hills'. But that was in another country. Here they are 'myriad warts'. It is a simple measure of the lexical shift.

Similarly, just as previously pastoral imagery had defined their patriotism, now the imagery of harvest was used widely to suggest death. But, unlike the lexical shift, this disguises both the scale and unpleasantness of death. Perhaps because it is contained within a field, now a battlefield, the harvest imagery conceals the magnitude of the slaughter:

> .... we are called to another reaping
> A harvest that will not wait.
> The sheaves will be green. O, the world of weeping
> Of those without the gate. (3)

The deadly effect of the machine-gun used against infantry suicidally deployed against it frequently produced a 'harvest' effect. But it suggests the neatness and precision with which the dead have been 'dropped' at the expense of adumbrating the scale, the military stupidity or the harsh facts of dying:

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(1) Wilfred Owen : 'The Show', CP. p. 50.

(2) ibid.

(3) J.E. Stewart : 'Before Action', BAWP, p. 148.

Just as the scythe had caught them, there they lay,
A sheaf for death, ungarnered and untied. (1)

But although such imagery catches perhaps the scientific precision of the slaughter at the expense of the more horrible aspects of the carnage and indeed its scale, nevertheless it contrasts favourably with the earlier propagandist rhetoric of Binyon:

Red reapers under these sad August skies,
Proud War-Lords, careless of ten thousand dead,
Who leave earth's kindly crops unharvested
As you have left the kindness of the wise
For brutal menace and for clumsy lies,
The spawn of insolence by bragging fed,
With power and fraud in faith's and Honour's stead,
Accounting these but good stupidities;
You reap a heavier harvest than you know.
Disnaturing a nation, you have thieved
Her name, her patient genius, while you thought
To fool the world and master it. You sought
Reality. It comes in hate and woe,
In the end you also shall not be deceived. (2)

The Romantics had ascribed to Nature human emotions. This process, the Pathetic Fallacy, was an inevitable part of the Georgian's stock-in-trade. Early in the war Julian Grenfell had celebrated Nature's close tutorial relationship with man:

The Kestrel hovering by day,
And the little owls that call by night,
Bid him be swift and keen as they,
As keen of ear, as swift of sight.
The horses show him nobler powers....(3).

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(1) Max Plowman : 'The Dead Soldiers', ULD. p. 103.

(2) Laurence Binyon : 'The Harvest', PPER. p. 44.

(3) Julian Grenfell : 'Into Battle', MIA. p. 19.

Now, Nature as man's mentor - and ultimate comforter - gives way to Nature as an indifferent permanence that underwrites the futility of human heroism and illusions. The Pathetic Fallacy attributes new attitudes to nature - 'contemptuous', 'indifferent', even 'rejoicing' in man's death. Charles Hamilton Sorley rejected the Georgian use of the pathetic fallacy as he rejected the early war jingoism and rhetoric:

> Earth that blossomed and was glad
> 'Neath the cross that Christ had,
> Shall rejoice and blossom too
> When the bullet reaches you.
> Earth will echo still, when foot
> Lies numb, and voice mute.(1)

The simplicity of Sorley's diction derives from a fundamentally different position, for he rejected not only Edwardian rhetoric but what he suspected was the Romantic cant of his contemporaries. Consequently much of his poetry has about its naivete of diction a ruthless directness that is the expression of his personal integrity.

By 1917, Rosenberg could attribute to nature a quality of vampirism:

> Earth has waited for them,
> All the time of their growth
> Fretting for their decay:
> Now she has them at last!
> In the strength of their strength
> Suspended - stopped and held. (2)

A similar attribution is to be found in Owen's 'Spring Offensive': The soldiers advancing to attack, climb up to a ridge -

> .... the far valley behind, where the buttercups
> Had blessed with gold their slow boots coming up -

from which the offensive is launched. The buttercups assume a different significance:

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(1) C.H. Sorley : 'All the Hills and Vales Along', ULD. p. 25.
(2) Isaac Rosenberg: 'Dead Man's Dump', C.P. ed. Bottomley & Harding, 1949. p. 81.

So soon they topped the hill, and raced together
Over an open stretch of herb and heather
Exposed. And instantly the whole sky burned
With fury against them; earth set sudden cups
In thousands for their blood.(1)

For Owen, the old Nature was gone, 'the former happiness is unreturning':

.....The sun may cleanse
And time, and starlight. (2)

But now -

.... Heaven looks smaller than the old doll's home
No nestling place is left in bluebell bloom,
And the wide arms of trees have lost their scope.(3)

With this post-Somme restatement of the pathetic fallacy, Owen in 'A Terre. Being the Philosophy of Many Soldiers' (4) also gives dramatic restatement to another romantic concept of man's oneness with nature. In this poem, a casualty confronted by the short time left to him, although now 'blind and three parts shell' has a desire for life, for an extension in time:

God! For one year
To help myself to nothing more than air!
One Spring! Is one too good to spare, too long?
Spring wind would work its own way to my lung,
And grow me legs as quick as lilac-shoots.

But it is well to remember that this seeming restoration of the Georgian belief in nature's restorative power must be read against the casualty's certainty that his wish will not be fulfilled. He contrasts his hopelessness with the dug-out rat, not now with horror and revulsion but with a tinge of envy:

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(1) Wilfred Owen : 'Spring Offensive', C.P. p. 52.

(2) ibid : 'Happiness', C.P. p. 93.

(3) ibid : 'Happiness', C.P. p. 93.

(4) ibid : 'A Terre', C.P. p. 64.

O Life, Life, let me breathe - a dug-out rat!
Not worse than ours the existences rats lead -
Nosing along at night down some safe rut,
They find a shell-proof home before they rot.

He envies even the microbes which 'subdivide, and never come to death', before concluding that 'flowers have the easiest time on earth':

"I shall be one with nature, herb, and stone,"
Shelley would tell me. Shelley would be stunned:
The dullest Tommy hugs that fancy now.
"Pushing up daisies" is their creed, you know.

Again, in 'The Calls' (1) with that ear for sound that characterises his work, Owen during his convalescence in Britain, hears a variety of 'calls', the 'quick treble bells' that scuttle the schoolboy (though he himself is getting a different education):

I must be crazy; I learn from the daisy.

In the following stanza, the Church's 'stern bells' 'among the rooks and doves at ten' sound out as he watches the verger close the doors and is quite content to be excluded for

... my religion's - same as pigeons.

In the section 'Carrion' in Harold Monro's 'Youth in Arms' we find this idea linked interestingly with a variation of Owen's 'Greater Love'. (2)

It is plain now what you are. Your head has dropped
Into a furrow. And the lovely curve
Of your strong leg has wasted and is propped
Against a ridge of the ploughed land's watery swerve.

You are swayed on waves of the silent ground;
You clutch and claim with passionate grasp of your fingers
The dip of earth in which your body lingers;
If you are not found
In a little while your limbs will fall apart;
The birds will take some, but the earth will take most your heart.

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(1) Wilfred Owen : 'The Calls' C.P. p. 80.

(2) Wilfred Owen : 'Greater Love', C.P. p. 41.

You are fuel for a coming spring if they leave you here;
The crop that will rise from your bones is healthy bread.
You died - we know you - without a word of fear,
And as they loved you living I love you dead.

No girl will kiss you. But then
No girl would ever kiss the earth
In the manner they hug the lips of men:
You are not known to them in this, your second birth.

No coffin-cover will now cram
Your body in a shell of lead;
Earth will not fall on you from the spade with a slam,
But will fold and enclose you slowly, you living dead.(1)

This poem, though with little real intrinsic merit, does derive a certain quality from an honest attempt to say something. The manner in which syntax and meaning correspond, the irregularity in lines and in rhyme pattern all suggest a real endeavour to describe and comment on something outwith the controlled and limpid Georgian canon. Our attention is arrested by the colloquial introduction, and the consequent simple sentence that effectively 'drops' the head before the syntax of the next two and a half lines takes the imagination along the curved length of the wasted leg. The use of 'clutch and claim' is as vivid as 'the earth will take most your heart' is sentimental and unconvincing. Perhaps most interesting is the use of 'cram', and the line, 'Earth will not fall on you from the spade with a slam', thus transferring the horror to the conventional funeral ritual. Similarly, 'fold and enclose' emotively gloss the harsh facts of decay, though there is nothing that really justifies this odd juxtaposition in the context of the poem. The ghost of Rupert Brooke still walks shoulder to poetic shoulder with Max Plowman. Nature, 'When it's over', will be restorative:

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(1) Harold Monro: 'Carrion', 'Youth in Arms IV', HUSS. pp. 93 - 4.

I shall come back and live alone
On an English farm in the Sussex Weald,
When the wounds in my mind will be slowly sealed,
And the graves in my heart will be overgrown,
And I'll sit in the sun. (1)

Should death intervene, his body will be

Cold, cold in the tender earth,
A cold body in foreign soil

but the spirit won't be daunted and will provide

an extra note in the blackbird's mirth
From a khaki ghost.

Implicit in such a thesis as this is the ever-present danger that too much might be made of the achievement of minor sensibilities. A minor versifier like Plowman would remain just that, even if his attitudes had shifted dramatically. Major poets occupy few rungs on the ladder - all the other rungs are gradations of minority. Some are defined, quite simply, by the inadequacy of output. There is a gulf between the poetic achievement of Rosenberg and the rich potential evident in his Trench Poems. The limiting factor can be a thematic circumscription, immaturity of emotional response, perhaps even the literary tradition in which the poet operates. Many of the minor poets, like Plowman, suffered irrevocably from the tepid quality of their poetic impulse and imagination. Their value is largely historical.

This is not true of Ivor Gurney. Though J.H. Johnston makes no mention of him in his major study of the period, his poetry is not only uniquely relevant to any discussion of poetic technique and of real historical significance, but it has an intrinsic worth.

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(1) Max Plowman : 'When It's Over', HUSS. p. 105.

Gurney was a sensitive Georgian, gifted in both music and verse. A private in the Gloucester Regiment, he was shell-shocked on the Somme and discharged. He resumed his musical studies but suffered steady mental deterioration, tragically illuminated by periods of musical and literary composition. He died in 1937, one of the last casualties among the combatant poets. He published two volumes of verse in 1917 and 1919 (1) and Blunden made a posthumous collection in 1954. (There is a Gurney Collection in Gloucester Public Library).

The special pathos that attaches to Gurney derives from these biographical data, and from his continual appealing in anguished letters for his release, petitions often accompanied by poems, but never posted. He was unable to distinguish past from present so that he went on writing 'war poems' till his death.

But the particular significance of his work from the point of view of technique is that his post-war work shows the influence of Eliot and, even more powerfully, Hopkins - perhaps because, like Hopkins, he was accomplished both as musician and poet. His later poems show that ellipsis, studied ambiguity, neologism, urgency in rhythm and language that characterise Hopkins' work. Thus, because he thought himself still in the trenches years after the Armistice, his post-war poetry has all the felt immediacy of 1914 - 18, but in a later idiom.

His poetic development during the war was typical. He began as Georgian pastoralist. 'West Country' has that simplicity of diction, muted musicality, hint of quaint archaism, that are typically Georgain;

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(1) Severn and Somme, 1917, and War's Embers, 1919.

Spring comes soon to Maisiemore
And spring comes west,
With bird-songs and blue skies,
On gay dancing feet;
But she is such a sly lady
I fear we'll never meet.

Yet some day round a corner
Where the hedge foams white,
I'll find Spring sleeping
In the young-crescent night,
And seize her and make her
Yield all her delight.

But yon's a glad story
That's yet to be told.

Here's grey winter's bareness
And no-shadowed cold.
O Spring, with your music,
Your blue, green and gold,
Come shame his hard wisdom
With laughter and gold! (1)

The fluent music gains from those touches of tender whimsy, bordering on the conceit, that distinguish the more successful Georgian lyrics. The 'young-crescent night', 'no-shadowed cold', 'hard wisdom' anticipate the quality of his poetic imagination.

A poem like 'Strange Service', on the other hand (2) has less to redeem it from Georgian orthodoxy; it is motivated by that 'little England' regional nostalgia we have seen to characterise early war service. Subsequently his pastoralism gives way to moral indignation and bewilderment, bitterness, demanding a directness, a crude simplicity of statement, for its effects. In 'The Target', for example, the impact of having killed requires a stark laconic colloquiallism:

I shot him, and it had to be
One of us! 'Twas him or me.
'Couldn't be helped', and none can blame
Me, for you would do the same. (3)

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(1) Ivor Gurney : 'West Country', HUSS. p. 11.

(2) ibid : 'Strange Service', MIA. pp. 14 - 15, see also MIA. 'To Certain Comrades' pp. 130-1 & 'Afterwards'. p.152.

(3) ibid : See Thomas Hardy's 'The Man He Killed', CP. London, 1952. p. 269. 'The Target', HUSS. p. 171.

Here the slangy cliches are used as a kind of ironic self-justification that holds self-knowledge at bay, and the final stanza describes a cosmic lunacy with himself at the mercy of it:

> All's a tangle. Here's my job.
> A man might rave, or shout, or sob;
> And God he takes no sort of heed.
> This is a bloody mess indeed.

Sassoon might well have written that final couplet.

His post-war poetry shows the deep scar of Ypres:

> Ypres played another trick with its danger on me,
> Kept still the needing and loving of action body;
> Gave no candles, and nearly killed me twice as well,
> And no souvenirs though I risked my life in the stuck tanks..(1)

This seems the syntax and visualisation of a different poet. 'Ypres' (2) shows more dramatically still the influence of Hopkins. It contains thematically much that was common to war poetry - the devastation of the landscape, the horror of the dead, "pushing up the daisies." It is thus crucial that we should understand what difference such ellipsis and parenthesis as he learned from Hopkins effected in the texture of Gurney's poetry, for in so doing we shall come to see what the basic textural difference between Georgian and modernist poetry is.

> North French air may make any flat land clear and beautiful,
> But East of Ypres scarred are most foul and dreadful
> With stuck tanks, ruined bodies needing quick honour's burial,
> But yet sunset, first morning, hallowed all, awed, made mysterious
> The ugly lives of land running to eastward; the Front of us,
> Worse things of conflict not yet hidden unseen underground.

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(1) Ivor Gurney : 'War Books', HUSS. p. 154.

(2) ibid : 'Ypres', HUSS. pp. 155 - 6. See also the final lines of 'Picture of Two Veterans' for the influence of Hopkins. HUSS. pp. 156 - 7.

(Shall we also fall stricken by one steel shared, sicken
The air with stenches, that were of Gloucestershire villages,
Be buried with haste, horror; by those were comrades before,
Lie, clovered, rot, with no hope but to make meadows quicken
When Time has cleared this dreadful earth of infinite brute
carnages;
And left some clean stuff; earth, beautiful - as once bodies
were?)
But the place was most hideous at times, of mankind most un-
heedful;
And we forgot all battle-honours - all glories storial,
Our country's birth, (our great pride) that would make stir us
Even on the brink of the grave to the risk of warfare.
Only the half light's wonder gave us remind (Made heart kind)
Of the villages and dear households we had left foolish and all -
dutiful -
(But too rashly for such vile pain, and grey hideousness)
At Ypres - the talk of soldiers was the one delight there,
The one goodness, greatness of bearing Hell - from-high without
fear.

The change is not in lexis but syntax. What is gained is a richness of texture, deriving in large measure from the ambiguities and rich associations arising from the close juxtaposing of words, the contrasting of adjacent phrases in different literary 'registers', from punctuation. The poem is richer in suggestion, undertone, Empsonian ambiguity, association. What has been lost, perhaps, is the clarity of direct statement, the kind of unequivocal single-mindedness of purpose that hall-mark s o much of the poetry written in the trenches. Indeed, only in Owen and Rosenberg do we find this textural richness.

But yet sunset, first morning, hallowed all, awed, made mysterious
The ugly lives of land running to eastward; the Front of us,
Worse things of conflict not yet hidden unseen underground. (1)

'First morning' suggests dawn, in contrast to the contingent sunset, but refers also to the Creation, relating to that feeling of wonder as No Man's Land was recreated as a pristine Eden. 'Sunset' here would carry over the idea of redness, as if the Creations was accomplished in cosmic fire.

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(1) ibid :

The elliptical 'hallowed all, awed, made mysterious' switches the imagination from the divine purpose to the human response. The interesting 'ugly lives of land' suggests immediately the lines, the trenches, and those who live (and die) in them. This ambiguity is supported by the capital letter of 'Front', embracing not only the neutral 'before us' but the Front, the world of horror. 'Not yet hidden unseen underground' is very Hopkinesque. By this concentration a packed effect is achieved, a density of the dead. And the imagination, because of the very concentration of the language, has to pick its way through the syntax as the narrator picks his way through the dead.

There is a poetic skill in the location of 'that were of Gloucestershire villages', creating a peaceful background for the crudity of the burial that follows:

> Lie, clovered, rot, with no hope but to make meadows quicken
> When Time has cleared this dreadful earth of infinite brute carnages;
> And left some clean stuff - (1)

Here the full horror of 'clovered' is brought out by 'rot', and we see nature's continuance not only above but feeding on man's decay. Even the one hope, 'to make meadows quicken', has to be for a future when the war is over. The contrast of 'infinite brute carnages' and 'left some clean stuff' is meaningful. There is the contrast between the rhetorical glossing of brutal reality and a new hoped-for simplicity. The placing of 'brute' between the general abstract 'infinite' and 'carnages' redeems the phrase from euphemism, and adds to the notion of scale implied in the abstractions the more concrete reality of death in war.

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(1) ibid.

The use of 'stuff' is not just a rejection of the pretentious; structurally it serves the purpose of throwing the emphasis back on 'clean', thus keeping clear the progression from 'brute' to 'clean'.

It is not my intention to offer a detailed analysis of the poem; I hope I have done enough to confirm that the textural difference between the Georgian Gurney and the post-war Gurney is the degree to which this kind of critical exegesis is relevant. It is not a matter of establishing that one is better than the other - they are different. They are different because poetic purpose is different. If poetry is motivated by the urgent need to communicate the reality of an experience to a wide audience, then direct statement may be the vehicle. If the intent is to suggest the complexity of the experience the poetry will be accessible to a more restricted audience, and offer rich dividends to fewer people. The Georgian Gurney is poetic Socialism; post-war, poetic capitalism.

As we have seen, in the disillusion that followed the dismal failure of the Somme Offensive, a poetry of moral outrage frequently propagandist in intent and thus dramatically direct, made pastoralism irrelevant. For most Georgian pastoralists the pastoral tradition was an anti-mechanist protest, or simply a setting acceptable and pleasant; the new starkness eschewed any such setting.

Among the Georgians, however, were two poets whose roots were more firmly in the soil than their pasoralist contemporaries, who were 'nature' poets in a fuller and richer sense. By this I mean, firstly, that their observation of natural phenomena was more personal and individualised, less of a convention. Secondly, that their basis was more philosophic, that this real and close observation generated and reinforced a statement about the nature of things. Pastoral poets used the countryside descriptively, nature poets used natural description philosophically. The two poets who observed the phenomena of nature "to see into the life of things" were Edmund Blunden and Edward Thomas.

Blunden was a nature poet in the tradition of Clare, Young, Thomson, Collins, Cowper. His language is simple, direct, with a localising use of dialectal words (1), and an almost archaic quality in lexis and syntax that successfully links Blunden with the eighteenth century tradition. Philosophically, his position is the Romantic one of nature as a significant harmony.

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(1) For a fuller discussion of this see Robert Bridges 'On the Dialectal Words in Edmund Blunden's Poems.' Society for Pure English, Tract V. London, 1921.

The consequence of this, as far as the war was concerned, was that his range of visualisation was never really swamped by detail. Just as his observation of natural detail had always been meaningful in terms of a larger and more metaphysical statement, so he seldom became, in war, obsessed as so many did with the details of crude death. What he did offer was a poetry of a war-ravaged landscape, of shattered buildings, of the tragic impact of the war on nature and man's creativeness. (1) The theme of his poetry moves from harmony to the disruption of harmony. Poems like 'Zillibeke Brook', 'The Unchangeable', 'Thiepval Wood' (2) are concerned not with harmony but with contrast, the contrast between a productive normality and the contemporary sterile desolation. Thus we find in his war poetry that same lexical shift that we have already traced in the pastoralists, but beside this is maintained also the traditional lexis of his pre-war and post-war poetry. The significance of this lexical equivalence is to underline his contrast between the sense of continuity and the sudden and immediate violence of the war's disruption. In 'Thiepval Wood' for example we find 'dim cool noise', 'lazy and continual flow', 'drizzling weir', indicative of that flow and continuity which is disrupted 'jabbering echoes', 'slatting wood', 'gibbet trees', 'poisonous smoke'.

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(1) See 'A House in Festubert', 'A Farm near Zillibeke', 'Les Halles d'Ypres'. CP. pp. 139, 163, 40.

(2) Edmund Blunden : CP. pp. 42, 47, 11.

But because horror and beauty were both part of Blunden's imaginative experience he remained conscious and appreciative of the beauty he still discerned, not ironically as most, but literally and sincerely. In 'Illusions', for example he can present with equal validity the beauty he discerned and the horror that cut so vividly across it:

> Trenches in the moonlight, allayed with lulling moonlight
> Have had their loveliness.....(1)

There is serenity in the caressing use of alliterative l's, and the bold but effective duplication of 'moonlight' in the same line.

> ....one imagined music, one even heard the brave bird
> In the sighing orchards flute above the weedy well.(2)

There is nothing in either syntax, lexis or metre to disrupt this, 'though 'brave' bird signposts another world of horror. But these moments of tranquillity are equally felt:

> There are such moments; forgive me that I thronethem,
> Nor gloze that there comes soon the nemesis of beauty,
> In the fluttering relics that at first glimmer awakened
> Terror - (3)

The final horror that assails him gains something from the fact that the moon that bathed the trenches in beauty is the light that illumines the horror:

> ....they're Death's malkins dangling in the wire
> For the moon's interpretation.(4).

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(1) Edmund Blunden : 'Illusions' - Supplement of Poetical Interpretations and Variations, Undertones of War, London, 1928. p. 272.

(2) ibid.

(3) ibid.

(4) ibid.

Perhaps in Blunden's use of 'malkins' we have one of the answers to his poetic quality. His very traditional, even occasionally archaic, language gains from rich accretions that time has left, and 'malkins' here suggests 'the scarecrows' 'the ragged puppets', 'the grotesque effigies', (all listed as possible alternatives in the N.E.D.) (1).

Because he was concerned with something more comprehensive than the particulars of landscape, he often managed to invoke a sense of evil more powerfully than Sassoon. He has always been a poet of 'undertones', and has been concerned more with the emotional consequences rather than the agreeable or disagreeable realities.

> Sparse mists of moonlight hurt our eyes
> With gouged and scourged uncertainties
> Of soul and soil in agonies (2).

Here the moon lights a world of human suffering in a ravaged universe. His use of the moon we have already seen in 'Illusions' to point implicitly to the indifferance of nature. In 'January, Full Moon, Ypres'(3) he uses the moon to effect an imaginative elaboration of the scene and a transformation of the particular details into an ordered whole.

During rest periods from the Front Blunden can still rejoice in the rediscovered harmony of life, as in 'Bleue Maison', 'Battalion at Rest', 'The Sentry's Mistake ': (4)

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(1) N.E.D. Vol. VI. 'M'. p. 87.

(2) Edmund Blunden : 'Festubert': The Old German Line. C. P. p.

(3) ibid : 'January, Full Moon, Ypres'. C.P. p. 40.

(4) ibid : C.P. pp. 43, 50, 139,

Some found an owl's nest in the hollow skull
Of the first pollard from the malthouse wall;
Some hurried through the swarming sedge
About the ballast-pond's green edge,
And flashed through sunny deeps like boys from school;
All was discovery, love and laughter all. (1)

The use of 'hollow skull' reminds us of the horrors such rest periods leave behind. The hollow skull is, however, of a pollard, that is a tree which has the whole crown cut off, leaving it to send out new branches from the top of the stem. Once again, we see the subtlety that derives from Blunden's language, the 'hollow skull of the first pollard' suggesting not only the horror left behind, but the new life growing again. The verbs 'hurried' 'flashed' indicate the excitement 'like boys from school' in rediscovering a world again in harmony:

All was discovery, love and laughter all.

The success of this poem stems from Blunden's quiet strength, from his ability to maintain a framework of permanence and harmony which could contain the violence and disharmony of war. Gently he reminds us of the violence against which such rest must be set:

With such sweet balms, our wounds must soon be healed.

In the next stanza, 'the jovial sun' is contrasted as Jove, who gives life, enables them to 'cheat still-hectoring Mars of his receipt', and perhaps he is reminded by 'that sharp fire your wine' of another sharp fire whose effects are not so beneficial.

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(1) ibid : 'Battalion at Rest' Supplement Undertones of War p. 285.

In 'At Senlis Once' the 'old happiness' can return, although temporarily as it never can in Owen's poetry. Always behind the personal anguish and the sense of desecration that shape Blunden's war verse lies the implicit faith that life will be resumed, that the madness of now is a tragic necessity that man can put behind him, that Nature, as it must, will reassert itself. The poems he wrote 'at rest' are confirmation of an essential optimism.

> O how comely it was and how reviving
> When with clay and with death no longer striving
> Down firm roads we came to houses
> With women chattering and green grass thriving.
>
> Now though rains in a cataract descended,
> We could glow, with our tribulation ended -
> Count not days, the present only
> Was thought of, how could it ever be expended?
>
> Clad so cleanly, this remnant of poor wretches
> Picked up life like the hens in orchard ditches,
> Gazed on the mill sails, heard the church-bell,
> Found an honest glass all manner of riches.
>
> How they crowded the barn with lusty laughter,
> Hailed the pierrots and shook each shadowy rafter,
> Even could ridicule their own sufferings,
> Sang as though nothing but joy came after! (1)

He is ultimately an optimist. For him, the war was not the end but the suspension of harmony. In his own case, as his post-war poetry reminds us, this was true. It was not necessarily so for others, but then few entered the war with his conviction.

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(1) Edmund Blunden : 'At Senlis Once', Supplement, Undertones of War, p. 276.

There is another difference we can discern. Because he can inset the harsh particularities of his war experience in a wider context, because too he is more concerned with the 'undertones' than the physical phenomena that engendered them, because his style, like his philosophic position, was formed before his relatively late encounter with the Front in 1916, the techniques of disillusion and frustrated bitterness were less likely to shape his poetry. As his trench experience increased he became aware of the difficulty of maintaining the balance between continuity and violence on which his poetic strength and personal sanity depended.

> But the hours passed and evermore
> Harsher screamed the condor war,
> The last green tree was scourged to nothing,
> The stream's decay left senses loathing.
>
> And war grown twenty times as strong
> As when I held him first at bay.(1)

A poem like 'Come On, My Lucky Lads' (2) with the despair of its last line

> It's plain we were born for this, naught else

best expressed the desperate spiritual discipline that the later stages of the war evoked. But his poetry was sanative in purpose rather than curative. He was concerned to maintain a personal philosophic position, not to undertake a national re-education of those ignorant of war's realities. In the devastation there was always some vestige of the old beauty and harmony to be found, that would sustain him:

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(1) Edmund Blunden : 'War Autobiography', HUSS. pp.50-51.

(2) ibid : Supplement, Undertones of War, p. 275.

In how many a valley of death
Some trifling thing has given me breath,
And when the bat-like wings brushed by
What steady stars shone in the sky.
War might make his worse grimace
And still my mind in armour good
Turned aside in every place
And saw bright day through the black wood:
There the lyddite vapoured foul,
But there I got myself a rose;
By the shrapnelled lock I'd prowl
To see below the proud pike doze. (1)

It is not entirely fanciful, I feel, to claim that not only the 'steady stars', 'the rose' and 'the proud pike' were sanative, but the strong sense of literary tradition and convention, the process of poetic composition were part of the same sanative process. The quiet tenor of Blunden's poetry was part also of that sense of continuity and ultimate restoration of tradition and harmony that were equally necessary to his survival.

Blunden also wrote a few poems, short and dramatic, with colloquiallism and slangy directness. 'Pillbox' (2) is an example of this, and it is patently not Blunden's forte. In another piece, 'Escape' (3) Blunden reduces the dramatic moment to a terse exchange between 'A Colonel' and 'A Mind'. It is a short play.

A Colonel -
There are four officers, this message says,
Lying all dead at Mesnil.
One shell pitched clean amongst 'em at the foot
Of Jacob's Ladder. They're all Sussex men.
I fear poor Flood and Warne were of that party.
And the Brigade wants them identified.....

A Mind -
Now God befriend me,
The next word not send me
To view those ravished trunks
And hips and blackened hunks.

---

(1) Edmund Blunden : 'War Autobiography' HUSS. PP. 50 51.
(2) ibid : 'Pillbox' Supplement Undertones of War p. 293.
(3) ibid : 'Escape'. p. 273.

A Colonel –
No, not you, Bunny you've just now come down.
I've something else for you.
Orderly!
(Sir)
Find Mr. Wrestman.

Despite the desperately controlled anguish, given emphasis in the quiet double-rhyme of 'befriend me' and 'send me', the dramatic supercedes the poetic. In 'Trench Nomenclature' (1) Blunden, as he tries to define

what man's humour said to man's supreme distress

expresses himself with a wit and whimsy, sharing the soldiers' tendency to alleviate the horror of the trenches by giving them amusing or familiar names. There is, for example, Jacob's Ladder which

ran reversed, from earth to a fiery pit extending
With not angels but poor Angles, those for the most part
descending

An imaginative wit takes us to Brock's Benefit, The Great Wall of China, Krab Krawl, Dead End, The Pike and Eel:

Ah, such names and apparitions! name on name! what's in a name?
From the fabled vase the genie in his cloud of horror came.

In 'Third Ypres' Blunden attempts a narrative, and it stands with Sassoon's 'Counterattack' and Arthur Graeme West's 'The Night Patrol' as significant attempts to produce narrative poetry from a lyric tradition.

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(1) 'Trench Nomenclature', Supplement to Undertones of War, p. 302.

For there is not much evidence that an established narrative technique, as available in, say, the works of Masefield, had much impact. (1) These war narratives were attempts to convert a lyric tradition to a new narrative purpose. Since it was a new purpose, and since Professor Johnston has dealt rather harshly with their narrative attempts, let me consider 'Third Ypres' more fully. The impelling force behind these narrative essays was moral anguish and moral outrage, and I thus deal with them more comprehensively in the next section. But it is worth examining 'Third Ypres' in the context of this discussion of Blunden's work.

Professor Johnston, though his analysis of the poem (2) has much in it that is perceptive, is certain that 'Third Ypres' ultimately fails:

> ...when he attempts to extend and enlarge his experiences by means of the narrative form, he is apparently unable to discover a controlling principle that would unify the experiences he seeks to portray. (3)

In terms of his thesis and, indeed, in terms of any accepted notion of narrative as a presentation of a chronological sequence of events by an objective observer, Johnston could not reasonably arrive at any other conclusion. In fact, narrative poetry was doomed to failure when the poet was combatant.

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(1) See Masefield, Collected Poems, London, 1923. War Poets could have read Salt Water Ballads (1902), The Everlasting Mercy (1911). The former is more lyrical than narrative, the latter dialectal story-telling. The Widow in the Bye Street, 1912, Dauber and The Daffodil Fields,(1913) are all in Rhyme Royal, hardly likely to recommend itself to a trench poet.

(2) J.H. Johnston : English Poetry of the First World War, London, 1964. pp. 135 - 146.

(3) ibid : p. 114.

> Clear-cut, meaningful narrative consequently was difficult or impossible, especially for those poets - and they constituted the overwhelming majority - who from the beginning had depended in a large measure upon the personal lyric response.(1)

H.V. Routh offers parallel comment:

> ..the science of destruction has developed to such a degree of ingenuity that human beings are left with nothing but a sense of annihilation. When the strongest & bravest warriors are either crushed and smashed to atoms, or suddenly felled by something which they can neither hear nor see, it is impossible to discover any grandeur in a modern battle and for that reason an epic can never be composed on the Great War.(2)

Criticism has created for itself an impasse. Blunden, it is conceded, has considerable ability as a poet, yet he is criticised for not writing within the formal demands of a specific verse-form which is deemed impossible in the context of the war. It does not seem to me a very profitable line of approach.

If we see the narrative exclusively as a chronology of external events and actions, seen objectively, then the criticism is well-founded. But how can one describe things too vast to be embraced by one eye or sensibility, things which one can 'neither hear nor see'. I believe that an alternative chronology gives shape to 'Third Ypres', a chronology of psychological stress. (Prof. Johnston, ironically, himself uses the expression 'the psychology of crisis' in his analysis) If we accept this, two consequences are immediate - we can explain quite simply the shift from a collective and objective narrator to a personal and individual sensibility, which most critics have seen as a structural fault. Secondly, we can explain the critical paradox of how poems that tell so successfully of the war's horror are formally unsatisfactory as narrative.

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(1) ibid : p. 146.

(2) H.V. Routh : God, Man and Epic Poetry, Cambridge, 1927, I.27. quoted also by Prof. Johnston.

The truth is that a chronology of stress would allow the personal lyric to be integrated as a component of the narrative, as the pressure of an offensive, counter-attack or patrol progressively forced the poet from his role as spectator or observer to his role as participant. As the pressure of such action increases and lessens, the movement is from the subjective to the objective.

Thus, in 'Third Ypres', the objective 'we' of the initial lines gives way to the more personal 'I' after about forty lines. This is that moment when the early optimism has been dissipated, the rains have come, the enemy guns that were supposedly out of action suddenly open fire. In that moment, the signaller he saw a moment before 'waving his flags' is suddenly dead. Nothing else exists but the impact on the poet of

> ... the lean green flies upon the red flesh madding.

His runner is killed. We are reminded of the earlier line,

> Sure as a runner time himself's accosted.

Orders are expected and there is not time for personal reflection:

> But there's no time for that now.

So 'we' resumes, and the chronological sequence is re-established:

> with hearts
> Past reckoning we are carried into night
> And even sleep is nodding here and there.
> The second night steals through the shrouding rain.

They hope for relief but instead, as the Hardyesque 'fierce destiny speaks' are ordered to relieve a unit further forward. His attention is diverted to the condition of those they replace:

> ... in a frenzy that none could reason calm,
> They turn away as in a dream they find
> Strength in their feet to bear back that strange whim
> Their body.

Blunden's unit is caught in a ferocious bombardment:

At noon of the dreadful day
Our trench and death's is on a sudden stormed
With huge and shattering salvoes, the clay dances
In founts of clods..

He and three companions find shelter in a concrete pillbox, and so the centre of narration shifts to there. There does not seem to me any logic in complaining that he here loses sight of the more comprehensive battle or the larger issues of the war. Fillboxes were not designed for historians, but that, in fact, is where the battle has pushed the poet. With dramatic suddenness the four are one. The poem becomes a mixture of personal notation -

...the stinking powdered concrete,
The lyddite turns me sick - my hair's all full
Of this smashed concrete.

Doctor, talk, talk! if dead
Or stunned I know not;

O I'll drag you, friends
Out of the supulchre

- and objective comment. He can describe objectively his own emotional disintegration:

While I squeak and gibber over you,

Then, perhaps with something of contrivance,

Look, from the wreck a score of field-mice nibble

and

Calmed me, on these depended by salvation.

His sergeant enters to report that they are in communication with the battalion on the right flank. He receives a message, a message of horror. A nine-inch shell has scored a direct hit, and the sole survivor, "all splashed with arms and legs" implores help.

The more monstrous fate
Shadows our own.

The use of 'shadows' here is worth comment, for not only does it suggest 'over-shadows', but also 'lengthens, and makes deeper, the shadow.' Thus it enables Blunden to overcome his own horror, and simultaneously extends the horror the length of the front.

> Taught how for miles our anguish groans and bleeds,
> A whole sweet countryside amuck with murder;
> Each moment puffed into a year with death.

The battle goes on, the rain 'weeps' still. The use here of such emotive terms as 'wept', 'swooped', 'swamps', is justified in that the conclusion is a moral statement. It is not a moral statement in the same way as say the moral epilogue to Coleridge's 'The Ancient Mariner', but is in the form of a question. When Blunden is required to relieve the battalion on his flank, 'all thought dwindled to a moan.' Because both personally and in any military sense, what relief is there?

> But who with what command can now relieve
> The dead men from that chaos, or my soul?

We see here those same elements that characterised his lyric poetry, but subordinated now in a narrative form with a moral purpose. In 'Third Ypres' Blunden, as Sassoon did, and to a lesser extend Herbert Read did, came to grips with some of the basic technical problems of the combatant poet - the scale of the war, the conversion of a lyric tradition to other purposes, and the creation of a narrative form that accepted that the narrator was also participant, and, that consequently in the context of such horror and devastation, his personal emotional chaos was an integral part of that story. Blunden did not write the poem as the battle was waged. He deliberately chose to recreate the personal swamping by events, because that, perhaps, was an essential part of the real story he had to tell.

Though his poetry is the expression of a love of the English rural scene and English folk-lore, it is erroneous to see Blunden as a Georgian sensibility. His love of nature is differentiated by the degree and quality of his involvement in the countryside, which is patently neither simply rustic background nor the contemporary guise of an anti-mechanism. Thematically, his poetry is traditional; it is muted and restrained in tone and feeling; it presents a quiet ordered nature in harmonious co-existence with man. His diction is his confession that his view, in the context of the twentieth century, is almost primitivistic. But the slightly archaic quality of his lexis and syntax is never superficial, like, say, Robert Nichols', nor is it studiedly literary, but is an integral part of his philosophic position - a declaration that his image of society is an anachronism, but one that he believes in.

It was in the main because of this that Blunden seemed better able to contain that moral anguish that impelled the re-creation of Sassoon, transforming a minor pastoralist into satirist. Blunden had never to re-create himself in this way.

> Lurking in the trenches by day or prowling out of them by night, I would perforce know what a bedevilled world is, and yet to make poems about it was a puzzle. In May and June 1916, in my notebooks, the grimness of war began to compete as a subject with the pastorals of peace. By the end of the year, when madness seemed totally to rule the hour, I was almost a poet of the shell-holes, of ruin and of mortification. But the stanzas then written were left in the pocket-book: what good were they, who cared, who would agree? (1)

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(1) Edmund Blunden : War Poets,1914 - 1918, British Council Pamphlet, 1958. pp. 26 - 27.

This quotation tells us a great deal about Blunden. There is the characteristically easy and natural use of such extinct idiom as "I would perforce know", the pun on 'mortification', the restraint of 'a bedevilled World' and the traditional definition of the poetic function, "to make poems", followed by the disarming understatement, "it was a puzzle". He regards his position, "almost a poet of the shell-holes" (1) as an escape from a tangential poetic experience that might have, had it become too exclusive, destroyed his equilibrium. The poems of that period, "when madness seemed totally to rule the hour", were "left in the pocket-book".

His ability to catch, in particular, the snatches of rest from the fighting, to make of these significant statements that constantly refer to both the war and the harmony it disrupted, is what appeals to Ian Carr:

> His best poems...are about the tiny breathing spaces or static moments between one action and the next. His themes are :self-preservation and how to offset madness; the devastation of nature by war; the fears and imaginings of a war-sodden mind; order and chaos.(2)

Although I feel that the initial assessment is perhaps too exclusive- 'Third Ypres', for example, should not be summarily discarded - Carr's analysis of Blunden's thematic concerns lacks only the final observation, that all of these themes are one - order and chaos, or as I defined it earlier, continuity and violence.

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(1) ibid.

(2) Ian Carr : Stand, IV. 3. p. 50.

A sense of meaning, of harmonic co-existence was necessary to his nature poetry. But as a war-poet - and this for Blunden involved both the violence and the harmony it disrupted - we must recognize that he made two poetic statements; one was an imaginative re-creation of order so that the experienced chaos could be endured; the other was the presentation of this chaos as a violation of order. Both statements were valid, and Blunden is more significantly 'a war poet'than criticism usually allows.

In general terms most critics have agreed with F.R. Leavis, in dissociating Blunden and Edward Thomas from the Georgian group:

> Mr. Edmund Blunden, because he has some genuine talent and is an interesting case, and Edward Thomas, an original poet of rare quality, who has been associated with the Georgians by mischance.(1)

Criticism, however, is still divided as to whether Edward Thomas' dissociation is due to an achievement that differs in kind or in degree. A.C. Ward, like Leavis, sees him as "entirely original",(2) not a Georgian at all. Others, while recognizing an elusive personal quality in his work, would not abstract him from the Georgian movement. C.K. Stead concludes:

> Thomas demonstrates the Georgian virtues at their best. (3)

Both James Reeves and Bullough defined his quality as a representative Georgian:

> (his)best work is distinguished by an acutely observed realisation of the English countryside, combined with intense introspection.(4)

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(1) F.R. Leavis: New Bearings in English Poetry, London,1959. p.66.

(2) A.C. Ward: Twentieth Century English Literature, 1901-60, London, 1964. p. 180.

(3) C.K. Stead: The New Poetic, London, 1964. p. 87.

(4) James Reeves: Short History of English Poetry,London,1961.p.212

> The experiments of such poets as (Mr. Abercrombie and) Edward Thomas in the approximation of diction and movement to those of ordinary conversation were expressive of their homely simplicity, and the general lowering of poetic pitch that marks our age from its predecessors.(1)

Imbedded in Leavis' rather condescending dismissal of the Georgians is a perceptive analysis of Thomas, whom he contrasts with Blunden:

> Only a very superficial classification could associate Edward Thomas with Mr. Blunden, or with the Georgians at all. He was a very original poet who devoted great technical subtlety to the expression of a distinctively modern sensibility...Mr. Blunden's poems are frankly 'composed', but Edward Thomas's seem to happen...A characteristic poem of his has the air of being a random jotting down of chance impressions and sensations, the record of a moment of relaxed and undirected consciousness, the diction and movement are those of quiet, ruminative speech. But the unobtrusive signs accumulate, and finally one is aware that the outward scene is accessory to an inner theatre. Edward Thomas is concerned with the finer texture of living, the here and now, the ordinary moments, in which for him the 'meaning' (if any) resides. It is as if he were trying to catch some shy intuition on the edge of consciousness that would disappear if looked at directly. Hence, too, the quietness of the movement, the absence of any strong accent or gesture. (2)

Since I cannot, I feel, evaluate Thomas' handful of war-poems other than in terms of his poetry as a whole, I must make some personal resolution of this critical dichotomy. In part, the difference is one of emphasis and interpretation. What Reeves sees as 'intense introspection', Leavis defines as 'an inner theatre', a concern with 'the finer texture of living','trying to catch some shy intuition on the edge of consciousness.'

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(1) G. Bullough : Trend of Modern Poetry, Edinburgh,1934. p. 63.

(2) F.R. Leavis : New Bearings in English Poetry, London,1959.pp. 68-69.

And where Bullough saw his 'diction and movement' as the typical product of contemporary 'experiment', Leavis judges it the inevitable expression of a distinctively personal quest for 'meaning.' The nature of this quest can perhaps be best understood in the consistency of the imagery that Thomas employs (1) It is this consistency that Leavis indicates when he writes that 'the unobtrusive signs accumulate.' The consistency with which Thomas writes of search and quest, light and dark, road and forest, moment and eternity, imply a coherence and comprehensiveness that are not Georgian. True, Blunden's work has a coherence also. But he recreated a traditional English countryside where Thomas was engaged in a search that was essentially contemporary. Such a distinction gives that 'literary' quality to Blunden's work and justifies Leavis' use of 'composed'. Thomas' diction is not simply an affinity with Frost; it is as it is because it reflects a twentieth century search for truth and identity. Critical interest in Thomas' diction and his affinity with Frost has somewhat blinded us to the skilful architechtonic that is the real measure of his art. In the short poem, 'Swedes', (2) for example, it is worth noting how the analogy of the opening of the turnip-pit and the opening of the Pharoah's tomb is simply yet artistically worked. His use of 'Tender - gorgeous' is not simply a sensuous Keatsian compound; it is, in fact, the meaning of the poem. The analogy lends to the richly perplexing climax, with all the layers of ambiguity in 'dream', 'Lies', 'of', 'this'. -

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(1) See for example 'Roads', 'Home', 'The Sign-Post', 'The Other'. CP. p. 163, 156, 22, 174.

(2) Edward Thomas : 'Swedes'. CP. p. 27.

But dreamless long-dead Amen-hotep lies,
This is a dream of Winter, sweet as Spring.

'Old Man' is a poem that indicates clearly the nature of Thomas' quest, and both stylistically and thematically it is archetypal Thomas. Here we find the quiet tone, the familiar diction and the speech rhythms that he characteristically employed to catch his experience. The diffident, tentative manner accords well with the attempt to capture an elusive memory:

Old Man, Or Lad's-love - in the name there's nothing
To one that knows not Lad's-love, or Old Man,
The hoar-green feathery herb, almost a tree,
Growing with rosemary and lavender.
Even to one that knows it well, the names
Half decorate, half perplex, the thing it is:
At least, what that is clings not to the names
In spite of time. And yet I like the names.

The herb itself I like not, but for certain
I love it, as some day the child will love it
Who plucks a feather from the door-side bush
Whenever she goes in or out of the house.
Often she waits there, snipping the tips and
shrivelling
The shreds at last on to the path, perhaps
Thinking, perhaps of nothing, till she sniffs
Her fingers and runs off. The bush is still
But half as tall as she, though it is as old;

So well she clips it. Not a word she says;
And I can only wonder how much hereafter
She will remember, with that bitter scent,
Of garden rows, and ancient damson trees
Topping a hedge, a bent path to a door,
A low thick bush beside the door, and me
Forbidding her to pick.
As for myself,
Where first I met the bitter scent is lost.
I, too, often shrivel the grey shreds,
Sniff them and think and sniff again and try
Once more to think what it is I am remembering,
Always in vain. I cannot like the scent,
Yet I would rather give up others more sweet,
With no meaning, than this bitter one.

I have mislaid the key. I sniff the spray
And think of nothing; I see and I hear nothing;
Yet seem, too, to be listening, lying in wait
For what I should, yet never can, remember:

No garden appears, no path, no hoar-green bush
Of Lad's-love, or Old Man, no child beside,
Neither father nor mother, nor any playmate;
Only an avenue, dark, nameless, without end. (1)

The paradox of the two names for Southernwood is significant here of two ways of experience, and also subtly suggests the passage of time from youth to age, the child and the adult, reinforced by the idea of the herb which is 'almost a tree' in contrast to the 'ancient damson trees'. Old Man, in the poem, grows beside lavender, with its associations of fragrant nostalgia, and rosemary - 'that's for remembrance!' The conflict between the 'name' and 'the thing it is' is underlined by his reaction - 'half-decorate, half perplex'.

The herb itself I like not, but for certain
I love it

initiates the related contrast of 'like' and 'love' that is fully explained later:

I cannot like the scent,
Yet I would rather give up others more sweet,
With no meaning, than this bitter one.

As suggested earlier his poetry is, indeed, a search for meaning and all he wrote is illustrative of his willingness to abandon the 'sweet' for the 'bitter' of truth. But in this search he had

mislaid the key. I sniff the spray
And think of nothing; I see and I hear nothing;
Yet seem too, to be listening, lying in wait
For what I should, yet never can remember.

Thomas' characteristic imagery of road and quest is in the contrast of 'a bent path to a door' and 'an avenue, dark, nameless, without end.'

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(1) 'Old Man'. CP, p. 104.

What he was searching for, as this is made most explicit in 'The Other', is himself, and it was a self that was to be discovered, in the Wordsworthian sense, in the inter-relationship of God, Man and Nature. It is a search for Wordsworthian moments when one can 'see into the life of things', of revelation and vision, when the primrose by the river's brim was never just a primrose. Thomas' modernity derives, I feel, from a quiet, controlled, tacit acceptance that the Wordsworthian formula may be an illusion. Wordsworth mourned experiences that he had once had, 'a visionary gleam' that had faded: Thomas searched for a vision, a revelation he had never had, for a self he could never catch up with, along roads that might, after all, head nowhere other than to death.

When Thomas in his late thirties enlisted in the Artists Rifles, he did so as a distinctive voice with a fully realised personal tone. Yet as a war poet he hardly comes into the critical reckoning. J.H. Johnston mentions him only once, in conjunction with Frances Ledwidge:

> Unlike Francis Ledwidge and Edward Thomas, who refused to let the conflict interfere with their nostalgic rural visions...(1)

It is true that Thomas did not write many specifically war-poems; according to H. Coombes (2) there are 'only six or seven war poems' in his one hundred and forty poems. It is relevant, however, to recall that Brooke wrote only five sonnets and Brooke has always kept his place in war anthologies.

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(1) J.H. Johnston : English Poetry of the First World War, London, 1964, p. 128.

(2) H. Coombes : Edward Thomas, London, 1959, pp. 87 - 88.

Thomas' lack of status as a war poet derives not from the slender output of his war poetry but from a rather unique conspiracy of critical ignorance and distortion. Thus the peculiar ambivalence in the critical attitude to Thomas as a poet is further aggravated in refereces to his war poetry.

Before attempting a personal assessment of this handful of poems let me indicate the nature of this distortion:

> He continued to write his favourite poems of nature and the countryside, even when in the front line...(1)

> (Thomas) found a therapeutic and sanative value in contemplating nature, or remembering rural England, in the midst of violence and destruction. (2)

The truth is quite simple, but completely otherwise: Thomas wrote no poetry at all in the trenches. He left England in late December, 1916, was sent to Arras on 9 February, 1917, and was killed by a shell on Easter Monday, two months later. His last poem was 'Out in the Dark' and this was written in December, 1916. He enlisted, indeed, in July, 1915, and was a map-reading instructor, before being commissioned in the Royal Artillery. But he did not write a single poem 'in the trenches' or 'in the midst of violence and destruction.' (3).

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(1) Brian Gardner : Up the Line to Death, London, 1964, p. 182.

(2) Bernard Bergonzi : Heroes' Twilight, London, 1965, p. 85.

(3) I am heartened to find support in a book that has just recently been published - Edward Thomas. A Critical Biography, William Cooke, London, 1970 - for a complete rejection of current critical assumptions.

Bergonzi claims also that the war made no real impact on Thomas' poetry:

> in his loving concentration on the unchanging order of nature and rural society, the war exists only as a brooding but deliberately excluded presence. (1)

I find this assessment of Thomas, both as nature poet and war poet, as unacceptable, say, as Bullough's description of Thomas' 'homely simplicity'. The war, in fact, kept obtruding into Thomas' nature poems. This took the form of explicit allusion:

> Now all roads lead to France
> And heavy is the tread
> Of the living; but the dead
> Returning lightly dance. (2)

> And when the war began
> To turn young men to dung.(3)

> "Many a man sleeps worse tonight
> Than I shall". "In the trenches." "Yes, that's right.." (4)

Or it made itself felt in imagery:

> Tall reeds
> Like criss-cross bayonets (5)

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(1) Bernard Bergonzi: Heroes' Twilight, London, 1965. p. 85.

(2) 'Roads', CP. p. 163.

(3) 'Gone, Gone Again', CP. p. 74.

(4) 'Man and Dog', CP. p. 181.

(5) 'Bright Clouds', CP. p. 59.

Sometimes less direct reference creates a characteristic sadness of tone and atmosphere:

> The cherry trees bend over and are shedding,
> On the old road where all that passed are dead,
> Their petals...(1)

But the impact of the war, the gradual submission to the personal pressures that induced him to volunteer, and subsequently to volunteer for France, are shaping forces in his poetry, which can be traced in such 'non-war' poems as 'The Owl', 'Man and Dog', 'In Memoriam', (Easter, 1915), 'For These', written the day he volunteered, 'Lob', 'Bright Clouds', 'Roads', 'Cherry Trees', 'Gone, Gone Again', 'Rain', 'Tears', 'The Sun Used to Shine', 'February Afternoon' etc. The fact that Thomas did not express himself in chivalric idealism, nor curative horror propaganda, nor crude realism, nor elegies for a generation, should not blind us to thesignificance of his work. Indeed, the absence of such typical contemporary expression is significant though we have been slow to perceive this. I.M. Parsons, in his anthology, Men who March Away, (1965), includes five of Thomas' seven 'war'poems. He allocates 'The Trumpet' first place in his first section, 'Visions of Glory', to initiate and typify "the mood of optimistic exhilaration.... a period of euphoria". It was in fact, written in the autumn of 1916, the second last of the poems. Parsons includes also 'There was a Time' and 'As the Team's Head-Brass' in 'The Pity of War', 'A Private' in 'The Dead' and 'Lights Out' in 'Aftermath'.

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(1) 'The Cherry Trees'. CP. p. 49.

If we reject this distorted chronology as a method of dovetailing Thomas meaningfully into the pattern of 1914-18, we must assume that either he had all his reactions to the war in eccentric sequence, or, alternatively, that his poetry says something other than it is normally to mean, something that is outwith the normal pattern of evolving attitudes.

Indeed, the latter alternative follows logically from the realisation that Thomas alone among the poets of real sensibility had no first-hand experience of the horrors of the war. As a man, his direct contact with the trenches was tragically brief; as a poet, it finds no reflection in his work. His significance is surely that uniquely among those of genuine and considerable talent he remained basically unchanged by the war, and he was never a 'war poet' like Owen or Sassoon or even Blunden. He was a poet who wrote honestly and perceptively about the two areas of which he had immediate knowledge - his personal preparation for the war, and the insidious and deleterious effects of the war on that 'pastoral calm' he is generally held to celebrate. The war endorsed his philosophic position; in turn, he endorsed the war, in his own distinctive way and on his own terms. It is here that his true significance is to be found, but it is a revelation of Thomas rather than of war.

Thomas, in 1914, wrote a review for Poetry and Drama (1) on the transient nature of war poetry based on a drummed-up patriotism;

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(1) Edward Thomas : 'War Poetry', Poetry and Drama, Vol II No. 8. Dec, 1914. pp. 341 - 5.

Commenting on Blake's 'War Song to Englishmen', which he esteems 'perhaps the finest of English martial songs', he explains Blake's success:

> He wrote from a settled mystic patriotism,
> which wars could not disturb. (1)

This is an illuminating definition equally applicable to Thomas himself. Support for this belief is found in 'This is No Case of Petty Right or Wrong', which is perhaps his most explicit statement about the war. It explains his decision to participate, and is his manifesto. The credo there reminds us of Yeats' Major Robert Gregory:(2)

> I hate not Germans, nor grow hot
> With love of Englishmen, to please newspapers.(3)

He has, in a sense, no public reasons for participation, but rather a 'mystic patriotism'. He accepts the war as an inevitability:

> Dinned
> With war and argument I read no more
> Than in the storm smoking along the wind
> Athwart the wood.

In terms of individual significance, both war and storm happen, and both are necessary for the brighter day and better world that will rise:

> Two witches' cauldrons roar,
> From one the weather shall rise clear and gay;
> Out of the other an England beautiful
> And like her mother that died yesterday.

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(1) ibid.

(2) W.B. Yeats : 'An Irish Airman Foresees His Death', ULD. p. 53.

(3) Edward Thomas : 'This is No Case of Petty Right or Wrong', ULD. PP. 44 - 45.

The ambivalence of Thomas' position is hinted at in this last line - the new world he anticipates must have much in it of the old world it replaces. The imagery of 'fire-smoking cauldron' leads into the phoenix image that follows.

> Little I know or care if, being dull,
> I shall miss something that historians
> Can rake out of the ashes when perchance
> The phoenix broods serene above their ken.

Although I find a confusion in the image in that the phoenix persists in rising from the cauldrons rather than the ashes of the fire, it is worth noting that the rather archaic lines - athwart, perchance, ken - is acceptable in the context. For when Thomas says 'God Save England' he does so because of an article of faith that has its roots in a mystic patriotism nourished, like Blake's, by custom and tradition.

> She is all we know and live by, and we trust
> She is good and must endure, loving her so.

The choice and location of 'we trust' leaves just enough room for uncertainty to move this affirmation away from dogmatic jingoism, and Thomas' belief that he must fight

> lest
> We lose what never slaves and cattle blessed

is a rather clumsy expression, perhaps deliberately so, of that English 'freedom' which we all claim as our birthright but can never really explain or define.

Of the remaining half-dozen 'war' poems, three are concerned with the bugle/trumpet. This is significant only in that it suggests a soldier in barracks rather than in the hectic of a trench war. 'No One Cares Less Than I (1) is a short simple poem that rejects not only the Brookean acceptance of death and 'some corner of a foreign field' - implied surely by Thomas' choice of 'under a foreign clod' -

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(1) Edward Thomas : 'No One Cares Less Than I', ULD. p. 20.

but in the second stanza rejects even the relevance of his own version.

> No one cares less than I,
> Nobody knows but God,
> Whether I am destined to be
> Under a foreign clod. (1)

For just as he 'scorns' Brooke's vague romanticism but professes to scorn death himself, so the bugles 'scorn' his words. The bugle (singular) has become 'they' in the second stanza, perhaps suggesting the 'they', the anonymous Establishment of Press, Government, Hig h Command, responsible but indifferent.

'Lights Out'(2) is linked to the war or rather army life only by its title. It is a fine poem, distinguished by a superb handling of syntax, a haunted and haunting lyricism, and a courageous acceptance of the individual's alone-ness when confronted with death. But, in truth, it could have been written by Thomas in or out of uniform. It is the poet's fight, and not the confrontation and anguish of nations, that shapes it. The imagery of forest and road, light and dark, life and death is the imagery we associate with his earlier work.

'The Trumpet' (3) is a difficult poem, which is perhaps why it is so frequently distorted into a statement of 1914 idealism. I cannot interpret it this way at all. The conclusion

> Up with the light,
> To the old wars;
> Arise, Arise !

seems to preclude any such reading. The poem's difficulty lies in the syntax, but also surely in the ambiguity of Thomas' position in relation to his theme.

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(1) ibid.

(2) 'Lights OUt', MUSS. pp. 131 - 2.

(3) 'The Trumpet', MUSS. pp. 133 - 4.

The imperatives of the first stanza 'rise up' (thrice) and 'scatter' (thrice) surely suggest not just an urgent commitment but a sense of desecration. Thomas insists that

> The dew that covers
> The print of last night's lovers -

must be dispelled, but we are aware of his own deep regret that this should be so. It must be so, because this is a new day and one must inevitably discard the dew (last night's creation) and 'last night's lovers' simply because they are past tense. Night is the time of dream, and the trumpet 'chases the dreams of men' as the dawn 'chases' the stars which 'left unlit', concealed the realities of the world.

When the 'clear horn' sounds, one must forget everything on the earth that is 'new-born', at dawn.

> Except that it is lovelier
> Than any mysteries.

He enjoins us to open our eyes to that same air

> That has washed the eyes of the stars
> Through all the dewy night.

We must rise up with the new dawn and resume the old struggle, confront the inevitable reality.

> To the old wars
> Arise, arise!

The substitution in the second stanza of the horn for trumpet - suggested perhaps by the earlier use of 'chase' - widens the poem to encompass war and peace. It may be that the reality of the new dawn is war - it could have been something else. The important thing for Thomas was the constant 'war', when night gave way to day, dream to reality, when 'life' had to be fought or death confronted on 'the borders of sleep'.

The best of the seven 'war' poems, and indeed one of Thomas' best poems, is 'As the Team's Head-Brass', (1) which is rarely found in anthologies. I.M. Parsons (Men Who March Away)1965, does include it, but his introductory comment suggests a basic interpretation which I cannot accept:

> ...poems like Thomas's 'As the Team's Head-Brass'..whose quiet rhythms and perceptive insights create a sense of pastoral calm which, by antithesis, makes their message all the more effective (2)

Parsons' interpretation links it with those poems that display Thomas'

> loving concentration on the unchanging order of nature and rural society (3)

But does an analysis of the poem really support this? The splendid cyclic movement of the poem may, indeed, have led both Parsons and Bergonzi to read this as the meaning, to see it as a Thomas version of Hardy's 'In Time of The Breaking of Nations'. A closer analysis requires us to balance the cyclic pattern - the plough inexorably 'narrowing a yellow square of charlock', the regularity of 'one minute and an interval of ten', and the lovers who disappear into the woods and reappear at the end of the poem - with the discordant notes inset within this pattern. It is only thus that the full meaning becomes clear.

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(1) Edward Thomas : 'As the Team's Head-Brass', MWMA.Also CP. p.29-30.

(2) MWMA. London, 1965. p. 21.

(3) Bernard Bergonzi : Heroes' Twilight, London, 1965. p. 85.

As the team's head-brass flashed out on the turn
The lovers disappeared into the wood.
I sat among the boughs of the fallen elm
That strewed the angle of the fallow, and
Watched the plough narrowing a yellow square
Of charlock. Every time the horses turned
Instead of treading me down, the ploughman leaned
Upon the handles to say or ask a word,
About the weather, next about the war.
Scraping the share he faced towards the wood,
And screwed along the furrow till the brass flashed
Once more.
The blizzard filled the elm whose crest
I sat in, by a woodpecker's round hole,
The ploughman said, 'When will they take it away?'
'When the war's over.' So the talk began -
One minute and one interval of ten,
A minute more and the same interval.
'Have you been out?' 'No'. 'And don't want
to, perhaps?'
'If I could only come back again, I should.
I could spare an arm. I shouldn't want to lose
A leg. If I should lose my head, why, so,
I should want nothing more...Have many gone
From here?' 'Yes' 'Many Lost?' 'Yes, a good few.
Only two teams work on the farm this year.
One of my mates is dead. The second day
In France they killed him. It was back in March,
The very night of the blizzard, too. Now if
He had stayed here we should have moved the tree.'
'And I should not have sat here. Everything
Would have been different. For it would have been
Another world.' 'Ay, and a better, though
If we could see all all might seem good.' Then
The lovers came out of the wood again:
The horses started and for the last time
I watched the clods crumble and topple over
After the plough share and the stumbling team.(1)

Little of 'pastoral calm' is suggested by 'fallen elm', 'charlock', 'fallow'. The fallen elm will be cleared only 'When the war's over.' If one of the ploughman's mates had not been killed 'we should have moved the tree.'

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(1) Edward Thomas : 'As the Team's Head-Brass', CP. pp. 29 - 30.

Many have been killed, and 'Only two teams work the farm this year'. The narrator-soldier, who, incidentally, 'has not been out', watches the team turn 'for the last time'. It is a 'pastoral calm', 'an order of nature', far from unchanging. The war has obtruded significantly and the rural order is, in fact, under heavy pressure. The full implication of this poem is surely, how long can such an order be maintained in the face of such pressure. The narrator will not be here next year - will the ploughman? will the lover?

A contrast between war and peace is inferred in 'instead of treading me down'. The ploughman discusses the weather and the war, one being the image of the other, as in 'This is No Case of Petty Right and Wrong'. The image is developed by the later observation that the night of the blizzard, the night the elm was blown down, was the night his mate was killed in France. And, by association, in this context, we cannot read 'share' and 'ploughshare' without recollecting the swords into which in time of war these are so readily re-cast.

Thomas states his personal position with directness and honesty. He would not mind 'going out' if he could 'return'. He could endure the loss of an arm but, as a countryman, would find the loss of a leg a much higher price. 'If I should lose my head' suggests not only the kind of sacrifice that would render all further discussion irrelevant, but perhaps also implies that rash heroism that might lead to such violent and final sacrifice. Yet 'for the last time' seems prophetically to accept the inevitability of such a death.

I am reminded, too, of the cauldrons in 'No Petty Case' that boiled as storm and war, to ensure the subsequent good day and better England. If the ploughman's mate had not been killed, the

fallen elm would have been shifted:

> And I should not have sat here. Everything
> Would have been different. For it would have been
> Another world. 'Ay, and a better, though
> If we could see all all might seem good.'

The old order Thomas loved has been changed. The new world has not yet come, and he has to take its superiority on trust. The ploughman, perhaps, reflects Thomas' view, that the old order was 'a better', but with a restrained hope that when all is ultimately 'seen' it will seem good. It is at this point that the lovers reappear - to imply, maybe, that their consummation has likewise been 'in the wood', hidden. Thus, the lovers play a dual role, seeming a norm of sanity, a permanence, as Hardy's 'maid and her wight', but suggesting too that the 'all' is the unseen maybe of tomorrow.

Finally, it appears to me significant that the energy and power of the early description of the team,'brasses flashing as it screwed along the furrow', is replaced by one where the narrator watches.

> the clods crumble and topple over
> After the ploughshare and the stumbling team.

In the trenches, the men crumble and topple over, and 'the stumbling team', though it still has strength, looks fatigued now. The reference here seems to me to have implications quite different from 'an old horse that stumbles and nods' in 'In Time of The Breaking of Nations', which suggests that deceptive leisurely sleepiness that is the guise of real rural permanence. As I read this Thomas poem I am left with a confidence that the field will be ploughed - this year. Next year, the fallen elm will still be there and, if the erosion of manpower continues, there may be no team to plough the charlock.

In terms of my thesis, Thomas' poetry makes a negative statement. Here was a mature poet, one who unlike most of his contemporaries in uniform, had served a long apprenticeship in prose and poetry. His observation was real and unpretentious; his style was flexible;his patriotism was deep-rooted and no mere excited emotional response to a national crisis. He had, also, a sense of historical perspective, a personal aesthetic that had evolved in the face of criticism.

What this maturity and stature would have achieved had Thomas become a trench poet must remain no more than a hypothesis. He never was a trench poet, and his poetic sensibility was not modified by the war; we cannot trace in his work even that major lexical shift that marked the work of minor contemporaries, his poetry assimilated the war, but was never really shaped by it.

In view of what we know of his artistic integrity, we would not expect Thomas to write of those areas of experience of which he did not have first-hand knowledge. Yet it was those areas of experience that produced major shifts in attitude with corresponding shifts in poetic purpose and technique. Thomas' attitude to death, his own death, his belief that 'Sleep is a novitiate for the beyond' (1) the imagery he employed, could hardly have been sustained had he had to contemplate not the inevitability of his own death but the actuality of the crude and brutal deaths of thousands of others. But no poem he wrote confronted such a reality.

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(1) Edward Thomas : Rose Acre Papers, London, 1904. p. 105.

On the other hand, the war was not 'a brooding but deliberately excluded presence' (1) Deliberate exclusion implies artistic dishonesty. In fact, it was Thomas' artistic integrity that allowed him to write about the war only as he knew it. What he knew about it was, that it shadowed all life, that it threatened to disrupt the old values and patterns of a rural England, and that he himself was impelled to participate in this destruction, in the inevitable storm before the calm. He did not react as idealist, propagandist, realist, satirist, or elegist. He reacted as Edward Thomas had always reacted. His philosophic base did not change, he had not to re-define his poetic function, no radical technical revolution was required.

In the trauma of these four years, then, the combatant poets had lost their addiction to the pastoralising habit, as the values and attitudes that nourished it became less viable. Its early dominance had been a consequence of not-knowing and not-wanting-to-know. But by the end of 1915, when the gap between early idealism and the current reality was less easily bridged, the pastoral technique was used as a counterpointing. As their sensibilities were overwhelmed by the horror and brutality of the new 'nature', these young poets then simply inverted the old Romantic concepts: Truth was equated with ugliness, not beauty, and the continuing use of the pathetic fallacy ascribed new and different emotions to nature. The consequence of this inversion was the major lexical shift I have commented on. As a literary convention, pastoralism was gradually abandoned, as it became irrelevant to their moral outrage and satiric anger. The Georgians had always been committed to poetry as

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(1) Bernard Bergonzi : Heroes' Twilight', London, 1965. p. 85.

a public thing; the Georgian Anthologies were an attempt to win wide public acceptance for poetry. But the public intent was now something quite different.

Of course, even a world war does not terminate a convention overnight. Nor does it mean that 'nature' itself became impossible for poetry. Indeed, as the poetry of Blunden and Thomas indicated, real nature poets could not abandon what was for them their way of perception and intuition, though the degree of their real 'participation' in the trench war was the yardstick by which change and modification must be measured.

But among those who were more than mere versifiers, war and nature still fused into some splendid metaphors and imagery, when the poet could meaningfully define one in terms of the other, short metaphors of this kind are often those vivid lines that one remembers:

> When the swift iron burning bee
> Drained the wild honey of their youth (1)

> Harsher screamed the condor war (2)

> Dawn massing in the east her melancholy army
> Attacks once more in ranks on shivering ranks of grey (3)

A short poem by Edgell Rickword uses just such metaphor when he personifies the biting cold as two officers who go out, one German, one British, to apply the coup de grace to those wounded and dying in No Man's Land. The success of the poem derives from the skilful extension of the metaphor: and it creates a cold, brittle, icily lethal picture, developing from the military necessity of putting

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(1) Isaac Rosenberg : 'Dead Man's Dump'. C.P. p. 81 - 84.

(2) Edmund Blunden : 'War Autobiography', HUSS. p. 51.

(3) Wilfred Owen : 'Exposure', C.P. p. 48.

those in agony out of it, to the bitter cold, which in this poem, does the job for them, with a heart-freezing clinical detachment.

Colonel Cold strode up the line
(Tabs of rime and spurs of ice),
Stiffened all where he did glare,
Horses, men and life.

Visited a forward post,
Left them burning, ear to foot;
Fingers stuck to biting steel,
Toes to frozen boot.

Stalked on into No Man's Land,
Turned the wire to fleecy wool,
Iron stakes to sugar sticks
Snapping at a pull.

Those who watched with hoary eyes
Saw two figures gleaming there;
Hauptman Kalte, Colonel Cold,
Gaunt, in the grey air.

Stiffly, tinkling spurs they moved
Glassy-eyed, with glinting heel
Stabbing those who lingered there
Torn by screaming steel.(1)

The slow numbing effect of the weather in contrast to the sudden death by bullet has produced perhaps the best bit of natural description in Owen's poetry:

Sudden successive flights of bullets
streak the silence.
Less deathly than the air that shudders
black with snow,
With sidelong flowing flakes that flock,
pause and renew;
We watch them wandering up and down
the wind's nonchalance,
But nothing happens. (2)

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(1) Edgell Rickword : 'WinterWarfare'. ULD. p. 92.

(2) Wilfred Owen : 'Exposure'. C.P. p. 48.

In this description the ear and eye are arrested by effective use of 'shudders' and the paradox of 'black with snow'. The poetic instinct that found 'sidelong' is reinforced by the alliteration of 'flowing, flakes, flock', then the alliteration is broken by 'pause'. The syntax of 'flock, pause and renew' catches magnificently the movement of thick, falling snow, 'in the wind's nonchalance', 'nonchalance' suggesting perhaps not just movement but an attitude of indifference behind it. This is fine descriptive writing, but it is given even more significance and is partly dictated by Owen's desire to make the contrast between the menace of the snow's seemingly gentle, casual movement, and the rapid, direct, but at that time, less dangerous bullets that 'streak the silence'.

But such metaphors, such descriptive writing, only underlines that the convention as such was no longer operative. When the combatant poet wished to express moral anguish, religious dilemma, psychological shock, he found little of use in the old bag of tricks that had sustained the illusions associated with the pastoral tradition. He had, indeed, 'lived in Arcady long time', but the 'vast chants of tragedy'(1) could not be expressed on the oaten pipe.

Owen's 'Happiness' (2) is perhaps the most illuminating statement in this context, for it seems to me not only to reject 'the former happiness' but the illusions and literary conventions that sustained it :

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(1) W.N. Hodgson :'The Call'ULD. p. 9; Leslie Coulson 'From the Somme', ULD.p.83.

(2) Wilfred Owen : 'Happiness', C.P. p. 93.

Ever again to breathe pure happiness,
The happiness our mother gave us, boys?
To smile at nothings, needing no caress?
Have we not laughed too often since with joys?
Have we not wrought too sick and sorrowful wrongs
For her hands' pardoning? The sun may cleanse,
And time, and starlight. Life will sing sweet songs,
And gods will show us pleasures more than men's.

Yet heaven looks smaller than the old doll's-home,
No nestling place is left in bluebell bloom,
And the wide arms of trees have lost their scope.
The former happiness is unreturning.
Boys' griefs are not so grievous as our yearning,
Boys have no sadness sadder than our hope.

The loss of happiness is the loss of radical innocence. But it was a manufactured 'innocence', where in terms of the poem's imagery, the mother protected the boy from the reality of the world. The house where they lived was not a real house, but a doll's home and now that this 'innocence' has been pushed into contact with a real world, it can never be rec overed. The security, the over-protection, has been replaced by a world of size and scale where hope and fear are always tremendously co-present.

In an alternative draft Owen had written

Ever to know unhoping happiness,
Harboured in heaven, being a Mother's boy.(1)

Lewis comments : 'The last phrase was doubtless too confessional for the poet's liking'. I doubt whether Owen could ever have written 'being a Mother's boy', and intended that it be read literally and autobiographically. (note the capital letter). The 'Mother' was England, symbolising the whole pastoral attitude and apparatus. My conviction gathers strength from what is patently a rejection of the pathetic fallacy :

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(1) see Wilfred Owen. C.P. ed. Day Lewis. London, 1964. Footnote p. 93.(1)

No nestling place is left in bluebell bloom
And the wide arms of trees have lost their scope.

The reference to the 'old doll's-home' implies Owen's realisation that the boy's house, from which the world had been so carefully excluded, had never even been a real house. In other words, Georgianism had been a defence mechanism against urbanisation and mechanisation. But the pastoralism it postulated was itself a lie, an idealised, regionalised myth of an England that never was.

Certainty and comfort are 'unreturning' as are the circumscribed nations that sustained them. Instead, the poet now has to accept a world of hope rather than certainty, a hope muted by 'sadness', a yearning. The new world is cosmic. There may be no 'nestling' place among the bluebells, no return to the artifically produced 'happiness' of romantic attitude or reassuring regionalism, but there is a world, which might restore -

The sun may cleanse,
And time, and starlight.

When 'heaven' was at hand, the boy's 'grief' was easily dissipated. Now, as 'yearning' implies, hope, aspiration, fear can not be so easily quieted. The new world is full of remoteness, distance, uncertainty : Heaven does 'look smaller' when you can no longer see it through a rose-coloured telescope.

SECTION III

"It is lawful for Christian men, at the commandment of the magistrate to wear weapons and serve in the wars" - so runs No. 37 of the Articles of the Church of England. In 1914 and 1915 its direction was hardly necessary, for the war was felt to be inspired by a great Christian purpose. Not only was it 'lawful' to serve in the wars, it was a privilege to do so. Reasons for the dominance of this attitude in the early months of the war were as plentiful as blackberries but basically their roots were both social and moral. Poets like Brooke, Robert Nichols, the early Sassoon, genuinely saw the war as an opportunity to liberate themselves from the routine and complacency of Georgian bourgeois life. Many of them, at the outbreak of war, had experienced little more of life's tribulations than were inset in the academic dolce far niente of the public school and Oxbridge pattern of a leisured class. They had had, perhaps, a surfeit of leisure. It was a pleasant life, a secure life, as warm and kindly and seemingly endless as the glorious summer that settled over England in July and August. But it was not a life that challenged, that explored a man's hidden resources. England's long century of settled peace had been perhaps too settled, and threats against it too distant. Many of these young volunteers felt the need to measure their qualities against more demanding circumstance.

> Don't tell me war does no good.... I think we gain the one thing that every man has wanted from his beyhood up - opportunity. Opportunity to show what he's made of. Opportunity to show himself what he's made of, to show that he can be the hero he's always wanted to be..... He may not always know that he wanted it, but to my mind it was the thing missing - the thing that made us at times discontented, moody and unsatisfied. The follies, selfishness, luxury and general pettiness of the vile commercial sort of existence led by nine-tenths of the people of the world in peacetime are replaced in war by a savagery that is at least more honest and outspoken. Look at it this way: in

> peacetime one just lives one's own little life, engaged in trivialities, worrying about one's own comfort, about money matters, and all that sort of thing - just living for one's own self. What a sordid life it is! In war... you have the satisfaction of knowing that you have 'pegged out' in the attempt to help your country. You have, in fact, realised an ideal.....
> Personally, I often rejoice that the War has come my way. It has made me realise what a petty thing life is. I think that the War has given to everyone a chance to 'get out of himself'.(1)

The first reaction of the volunteer armies to the war was to welcome it as an escape from anything from tailor's bills to the constrictions of a social class. But, more important, it was through free participation in the war that a way was to be opened to a richer experience that, in turn, would promote a great moral regeneration:

> Now, God be thanked Who has matched us with His hour,
> And caught our youth, and wakened us from sleeping;
> With hands made sure, clear eye, and sharpened power,
> To turn, as swimmers into cleanness leaping,
> Glad from a world grown old and cold and weary,
> Leave the sick hearts that honour could not move,
> And half-men, and their dirty songs and dreary,
> And all the little emptiness of love.(2)

Behind Brooke's rhetorical disillusion with the old, cold and weary world there lie two quite genuine assumptions. First, that the war was an escape and a challenge; secondly, that the volunteer who accepted this challenge would find in so doing a moral redemption. It was Brooke's tragedy as a war poet that he should visualise this opportunity in terms of 'swimmers into cleanness leaping', an image that soon, like the idealism and rhetoric that inspired it, foundered in the actualities of mud and dirt and squalor.

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(1) Lieut. H.P. Maiwaring Jones - dated July 1916 - killed August 1917, aged 21.
LFE 159.

(2) Rupert Brooke: Sonnet I, December 1914. HUSS. p. 53.

The antipathies that were to grow between the soldiers and the stay-at-homes,'the sick hearts that honour could not move', thus finds early expression. But the acrimony that complained in November 1915,

> We fought and bled at Loos
> While you were on the booze.....(1)

was up till then a more tolerant compounding of compassion with contempt for those 'half-men' for whom opportunity had not knocked or who had been deaf to its summons.

> And he is dead who will not fight
> And who dies fighting has increase.(2)

Thus, for many, the male population of Britain was divided simply but effectively in two. War was to be the great catalyst that would transform some into giants, cleansed of life's littleness. As interesting historically as it is intrinsically unsatisfying, Robert Nichols' Ardours and Endurances embodies this attitude:

> Heads forget heaviness
> Hearts forget spleen,
> For by that mighty winnowing
> Being is blown clean.
>
> Light in the eyes again,
> Strength in the hand,
> A spirit dares, dies, forgives,
> And can understand!
>
> And best! Honour comes back again
> After grief and shame,
> And along the wind of death
> Throws a clean flame. (3)

Basically, the fault of this chronologically arranged sequence of poems is that the early unthinking 'ardours' are too little modified by the brief 'endurances' that Nichol experienced at the Front before he was invalided out.

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(1) Soldiers' version of the popular song 'When you wore a tulip'.

(2) Julian Grenfell: 'Into Battle', May 1915. ULD. p. 34.

(3) Robert Nichols : 'The Day's March' Ardours & Endurances. London, 1917. p. 13.

His contact with the realities of the war was just enough to tinge but not modify his poetic sensibility, and this is reflected in his unsatisfactory alternation of 'Georgianism in uniform' with abortive experiments with impressionist techniques.

In 'The Summons' we see Nichols, spurned by 'Fame' and 'Love', reaching out to the war as the opportunity to transcend the pettiness of bourgeois social and moral preoccupations. In 'Farewell to Place of Comfort' he celebrates that natural world he loves and turns to face the uncertainties ahead -'Happy Now I Go'. The subsequent section, 'The Approach', brings Nichols close to the 'vortex' of war. As with Brooke, the war is to promote a moral regeneration, and there are similar shadowy allusions to a personal 'grief and shame'. Not surprisingly, since the scope and themes approximate closely to those of the 1914 Sonnets, we find Nichols operating in the same area of rather superficial imagery and uncomplicated rhetoric. And if a comparison has to be made, it is that Nichols' poetry is even more self-conscious than Brooke's, and much less assured and poised technically:

> Was there love once? I have forgotten her.
> Was there grief once? Grief yet is mine.
> O loved, living, dying, heroic soldier,
> All, all, my joy, my grief, my love, are thine! (1)

Somehow, that final exclamation mark is the last straw.

It is difficult now to see justification for the adulation, both critical and popular, that surrounded Nichols in 1917, when he was esteemed by many as the significant war poet.

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(1) Robert Nichols : 'Fulfilment'. Georgian Poetry 1916 - 17. ed. Marsh p. 62.
Ardours & Endurances, p.44, 'The Summons', pp. 4-6, 'Farewell To Place of Comfort', P. 7, 'The Approach', pp. 12 - 15.

In The Muse in Arms (1917), an anthology that brings together fifty-one poets, there are no less than eleven poems by Nichols, easily the largest single contributor. Perhaps this was because he struck the 'right' blend between conventional thoughts conventionally expressed and that appearance of the new that it was felt the war should have produced. Most of his war themes had by this time been accommodated into the Georgian canon, and were to be found in the Marsh anthologies. Nostalgic longing for the English countryside from the trenches in 'At the Wars' or grief for the fallen in 'Behind the Lines' - such themes were smoothed into pleasant euphemism, a euphemism based on a vagueness in perception and grasp further obscured by vagueness in communication. It was the kind of war poetry that satisfied the most sentimental civilian. He dismisses his earlier wish not to hear the song of the yellow-hammer in 'At the Wars' as being too painful:

> Yet sing thy song: there answereth
> Deep in me a voice which saith:
> 'The gorse upon the twilit down,
> The English loam so sunset brown,
> The bowed pines and the sheep-bells' clamour,
> The wet, lit lane and the yellow-hammer,
> The orchard and the chaffinch song
> Only to the Brave belong,
> And he shall lose their joy for aye
> If their price he cannot pay.
> Who shall find them dearer far
> Enriched by blood after long war.' (1)

The quaint verbal archaisms, the pastoral catalogue and 'the Brave', gloss over the moral blackmail, the sentimentality and the rhetorical cant of the concluding lines.

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(1) Robert Nichols : 'At the Wars', MIA p. 4. Ardours & Endurances p. 28. 'Behind the Lines', p. 27.

Nichols, however, has seen action, has seen the reality of death, and occasionally there are lines that suggest something less insubstantial than the immolation glossed in Brookean rhetoric:

> .....the premonitory ache
> Of bodies, whose feet, hands, and side
> Must soon be torn, pierced, crucified. (1)

Although his trench experience has not modified his sensibility to that degree where he develops new attitudes that demand new techniques, there is a dissatisfaction patent in his rather abortive attempts at impressionism. And much of his reputation had its origins in such poems in the 'Battle' sequence. For although the Georgian canon had accommodated certain of the sentiments about war, dying, heroism etc., it was incapable of coping with poetry about modern fighting. So in poems like 'The Assault', Nichols had to experiment. Whatever it is, 'The Assault' doesn't seem to me to be a poem at all. The purely imitative form sinks only too readily into the 'Bang! bang! you're dead' of onomatopoeia. And the tension and confusion of the assault has bred only a dislocation in language, the onomatopoeic interspersed with vague and often pretentious lines which betray that his sensibility has not yet progressed beyond seeing the war simply as an instrument of self-revelation.

> Blindness a moment. Sick.
> There the men are.
> Bayonets ready : click!
> Time goes quick;
> A stumbled prayer...somehow a blazing star
> In a blue night...where?
> Again prayer.
> The tongue trips. Start:
> How's time? Soon now. Two minutes or less.

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(1) Robert Nichols : 'The Assault', p. 37.

The guns' fury mounting higher,
Their utmost. I lift a silent hand. Unseen I bless
Those hearts will follow me.
And beautifully
Now beautifully my will grips.
Soul calm and round and filmed and white! (1)

It is difficult to decide whether one rebels most against the technical confusion, the pretentiousness of the unseen blessing, the vague climactic rhetoric of the last line, or reserves one's condemnation most for the imitative monosyllables later:

A wail!
Lights. Blurr.
Gone.
On. on. Lead. Lead. Hail.

Whatever this notation is, it fails to be poetry. And time has dealt harshly but justly with Nichols' bubble reputation.

In the rhetoric of 1914-15 we find reiterated a number of central ideas: That the life that was being left behind was an inferior one, where a man's mettle was untested, a place of pettiness of conception and preoccupation with trivia. That it was beneficial and privilege to quit this for the elevating and ennobling experience of war.

The cares we hugged drop out of vision,
Our hearts with deeper thoughts dilate,
We step from days of sour division
Into the grandeur of our fate.(2)

The end of this would be that a man would know himself a man, and be more a man for the experience. Perhaps the archetype of such rhetoric was Ralph Vernede's The Call. A friend of Chesterton, a man of middle age, he nevertheless was fired with this tremendous sense of a new-found virility and purpose:

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(1) Robert Nichols : 'The Assault', Georgian Poetry 1916-17. ed. Marsh. pp. 58 - 61.

(2) Laurence Binyon : 'The Fourth of August', ULD. p. 7.

Lover of ease, you've lolled and forgot
All the things that you meant to right;
Life has been soft for you, has it not?
What offer does England make tonight?
This - to toil and to march and to fight
As never you've dreamed since your life began;
This - to carry the steel-swept height,
This - to know that you've played the man! (1)

Rhetorical questions, dramatic pauses, climax - all leading to the final climax that has become now almost bathetic. Nevertheless there is a genuine, if naive, idealism, that mood that J.B. Priestley defined as 'a conscription of the spirit' (2)

Alan Seeger, one of numerous European-Americans volunteering early in the war, celebrated

That kinship with the stars that only War
Is great enough to lift man's spirit to, (3)

and later, in the same poem, 'The Aisne' praised the 'high fellowship' that war engendered because it,

More than dull Peace or its poor votaries could,
Taught us the dignity of being men.

W.N. Hodgson, killed like Seeger in 1916, found however that life had been good. He could recollect experiences, (4)'while blood was High', at dawn or in a 'woodland hollow' when something of the significance of life had been apparent. 'Yet in our hearts we know these were not at all.' One can sense, I think, that Hodgson felt this inadequacy both as a man and as a poet.

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(1) Ralph Vernede : 'The Call', HUSS p. 141.

(2) J.B. Priestley: Margin Released, London, 1962. p.82. 'There came out of the unclouded blue of that summer, a challenge that was almost a conscription of the spirit..a challenge to what we felt was our untested manhood.'

(3) Alan Seeger : 'The Aisne', ULD pp. 30 - 32.

(4) W.N. Hodgson : 'The Call', August 1914, ULD. pp. 9 - 10.

Both art and life should signify more than the Georgians felt able to experience. War was welcomed as the opportunity to suffer, to endure, a kind of flagellation that could promote a spiritual and moral elevation:

> through toil and pains
> Deeds of a purer lustre given to few,
> Made more the perfect glory that remains.
>
> And when the summons in our ears was shrill
> Unshaken in our trust we rose, and then
> Flung but a backward glance, and carefree still
> Went strongly forth to do the work of men. (1)

War had opened new perspectives for many who had felt stunted and perverted by a too materialistic society. They could now live and do more meaningfully than they could ever have done in the service of Mammon:

> See young Adventure there
> ('Make-money-quick' that was)
> Hurls down his gods that were
> For Honour and the Cross.
>
> Old 'Grab-at-Gold lies low
> in Flanders. And again
> (Because men will it so)
> England is ruled by Men. (2)

For the man who had failed to stamp his impress on life, whose life had been a disappointment, war offered a consolation that was greater than reputation in life or art could have offered:

> It is too late now to retrieve
> A fallen dream, too late to grieve
> A name unmade, but not too late
> To thank the gods for what is great;
> A keen-edged sword, a soldier's heart,
> Is greater than a poet's art,
> And greater than a poet's fame
> A little grave that has no name.(3)

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(1) W.N. Hodgson : 'The Call', August 1914. ULD pp. 9 - 10.

(2) F.W. Harvey : 'A People Renewed'. MIA. p. 151.

(3) Francis Ledwidge: 'Soliloquy', ULD. p. 28.

A soldier's death and an anonymous grave was more than adequate compensation for life's failure.

One sees in so many of these poems a tremendous sense of being men - vigorous, virile, purposeful. Day Lewis had contemptuously dismissed the Georgian poets as those who followed routes pioneered by their ancestors 'drinking small beer in an effort to prove their virility.' Suddenly, now, they felt themselves virile. Part of the explanation was that the war brought a new simplicity to life. The period of training set new problems, developed physical fitness, encouraged new satisfactions, and all of this seemed somehow more basic. A sense of animal well-being, simple needs catered for, a new and different contact with man and with nature - all of these tended to promote a genuine sense of enjoying a more satisfyingly elementary life of greater immediacy.

> ....the men slept like babies, ate
> like hunters, and re-discovered the
> joy of infancy in getting some
> rather elementary bodily movement
> to come right. They saw everything
> that God had made, and behold!
> it was very good. That was the
> vision. (1)

Constantly we find that the imagery is of purification and redemption - 'swimmers into cleanness leaping', 'mighty winnowing', being blown clean', 'a clean flame' - reinforcing a basic concept of purgation by wind or fire or water.

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(1) C.E. Montague : Disenchantment (1922) Chapter I. p. 13.

Part of the explanation of this sense is in terms of their ignorance of what twentieth century warfare was to be like. Part of it is in terms of the social climate they rejected, conducting as many of them did, a curious love-hate relationship with the security and privilege of the class they inherited.

It was the great hour of the volunteers. And all volunteers - clerks, teachers, farm-labourers, irrespective of social class - could likewise be liberated from the pettinesses of a constricting social order, be given the same promise of a personal moral re-generation. And the volunteer had not only this privilege but the satisfaction of participating in The Great Adventure, The Grand Crusade, which would lead ultimately to the salvation of others. In 1914, no doubt was entertained other than that this would be a great national upsurge, the rebirth of a nation:

> There is not anything more wonderful
> Than a great people moving towards the deep
> Of an unguessed and unfeared future.... (1)

C.E. Montague in 'Disenchantment' reinforces this idea of a great national and moral upheaval:

> Most of these volunteers of the prime were men of handsome and boundless illusions. Each one of them quite seriously thought of himself as a molecule in the body of a nation that was really, and not just figuratively, 'straining every nerve' to discharge an obligation of honour. (2)

The volunteer's privileged position was simply that of the warrior in the van. He was not only a Happy (fortunate) Warrior, fortunate in a guaranteed redemption, but a White Knight about to break a lance in the greater cause of humankind.

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(1) John Freeman : 'Happy is England Now' November 1914. Georgian Poetry 1916 - 17 ed. Marsh. p. 138.

(2) C.E. Montague : 'Disenchantment' (1922) Chapter I. p. 10.

In Herbert Asquith's 'The Volunteer' the clerk has the opportunity of high adventure, the escape from a routine of the insignificant and humdrum:

> Here lies the clerk who half his life has spent
> Toiling at ledgers in a city grey.
> Thinking that so his days would drift away
> With no lance broken in life's tournament:
> Yet ever twixt the books and his bright eyes
> The gleaming eagles of the legion came,
> And horsemen, charging under phantom skies,
> Went thundering past beneath the Oriflamme.
> And now those waiting dreams are satisfied;
> From twilight to the halls of dawn he went;
> His lance is broken; but he lies content
> With that high hope, in which he lived and died
> And falling thus, he wants no recompense,
> Who found his battle in the last resort;
> Nor needs he any hearse to bear him hence
> Who goes to join the men of Agincourt. (1)

The language and imagery of this poem - 'life's tournament', 'gleaming eagles of the legion', 'horsemen charging', 'beneath the Oriflamme','his lance is broken' - all reinforce the concept of the volunteer as a warring knight.

The language also betrays, as does that of most of the early trench poets, (2) how ill-prepared these young men were for the actualities of modern warfare. Though their conception of war in terms of cavalry, lances and sabres, seems now naive, it was shared by many of the High Command who in every attempted assault held in reserve squadrons of dragoons and hussars (with lances and pennants) for the decisive break-through that never came.

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(1) Herbert Asquith : 'The Volunteer' dated 1914, published in Georgian Poetry 1916 - 17 ed. Marsh.p.181.

(2) For example: 'brazen frenzy' - Grenfell 'Into Battle' HUSS p. 70. 'embattled plumes' - Rosenberg 'The Dead Heroes' C.P. 1949. p. 42. 'glory gathered by his sword' - Nichols 'The Last Salute' MIA p.124. 'martial throng' Alexander Robertson 'The New Aeneid ' MIA p. 44.

There seems little doubt that the volunteers conceived themselves to be engaged in a great Christian enterprise that would restore the chivalric (and public-school) code to the world. For it was only too easy for these volunteer poets to slip from the public-school moral and athletic code in which they were educated into an acceptance of a chivalric vision and knightly imagery, a kind of muscular Christianity reminiscent of the Knights Templar or the Knights of St. John.

> Critics now deride public schools, but it is impossible not to notice the self-command and discipline that their young men showed. It was as if their whole education had been purchased just for this and geared especially to it. In a way, one must suppose that it had. On Speech Day the school had always encouraged the ready-made patriotic platitude about the mission of the Empire which most of the boys accepted. This ethos, with its traditions of conservatism, its tinges of cruelty and its zest for passionate male friendship, its idolization of games, flourished on the battlefield and went on permanent record in the poetry. There can be no doubt that the toughness and bullying experienced at many schools hardened the pupils and made them more resilient under war stress than men who had been less privileged and known nothing like it. It has been explained to me, though with irony, that if anybody had gone to Christ's Hospital he would have found many of the discomforts of the trenches as things of naught! (1)

Their belief in the rightness of their actions was reinforced by propagandists like Bertram Dobell, John Oxenham or Canon Rawnsley, whose choicest effusions constantly juxtaposed Prussian atrocities against the Christian undertaking of the Allies, an undertaking for which God's gratitude was assured.

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(1) Maurice Hussey : Poetry of the First World War, London, 1967. Introduction p. 3.

They are not men who do such shameful deeds,
But bestial creatures in the shape of men;
One land alone this mongrel progeny breeds
Kin to the tribe that herd in cave and den. (1)

Oxenham, in 'Our Boys who have gone to the Front,'assured the young soldiers that they were

True sons of God in seeking not your own,
Yours now the hardships, yours shall be the splendour
Of the great Triumph and the King's 'Well done'! (2)

If God sounded a bit like the Captain of the School, it was the school most of them had recently left, some prematurely. And these were, after all, the best-selling poets of their time. (3)

Even Sassoon was initially one of the Happy Warriors. Due to a combination of circumstances - a fall from his horse, a broken arm, subsequent transfer from cavalry trooper to infantry officer - it was late 1915 before he made direct contact with the realities of France. Earlier in the year, in a poem that he subsequently rejected as 'too nobly worded' Sassoon could exult no less than Brooke in the certainty of moral redemption implicit in participation:

War is our scourge; yet war has made us wise,
And, fighting for our freedom, we are free.
Horror of wounds and anger at the foe,
And loss of things desired; all these must pass
We are the happy legion.....(4)

The Men Who Marched Away felt themselves to be treading the same roads on the same great mission as their medieval predecessors:

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(1) Bertram Dobell : 'The Prussian Atrocities', PPER p. 65.

(2) John Oxenham : 'Our Boys who have gone to the Front' PPER. p. 142.

(3) Canon Rawnsley's The European War, 1914 - 15 Poems was a best-seller and John Oxenham sold over 70,000 copies.

(4) Siegfried Sassoon : 'Absolution', 1915. MIA p. 45.

The cobbles of the age-worn Way
Echo the march of the mailed Crusaders;
Whilst many an oath of pious fervour,
Between their chaunt and roundelay,
Gives proof to any close observer
That men are little changed today! (1)

This chivalric crusading imagery colours the poetry of the period. Many of the elegies celebrating those killed in the early years of the war are in terms of the chivalric code. Robert Nichols, in 'The Last Salute' to the memory of H.S.G. killed at Ypres writes:

Two Grenfells lie, and my boy is made man,
One with these elder knights of chivalry. (2)

Aubrey Herbert's elegy on Rupert Brooke sees Brooke in an aura of romantic Hellenism, a poet of Greek light, Christian fire and English pastoral tradition. Glossing rather rhetorically over his death, Herbert sees him honoured by British and German alike, because his poetry contained those values of fair play, humour, truth and love:

He who sang of dawn and evening, English glades and
light of Greece,
Changed his dreaming into sleeping, left his sword
to rest in peace,
Left his vision of the springtime, Holy Grail and
Golden Fleece,
Took the leave that has no ending, till the waves
of Lemnos cease.
Galland foe and friend may mourn him, for he sang
the knightly truth. (3)

Maurice Baring's elegy on the death of Auberon Herbert, killed in the air in 1916, has something of that idealisation of youth we associate with the death of Rupert Brooke.

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(1) Gordon Alchin: 'The Road'. MIA. p. 45.

(2) Robert Nichols : 'The Last Salute'. MIA. p. 123.

(3) Aubrey Herbert : 'R.B.'. MIA. p. 128.

There are reminiscences of 'The Scholar Gipsy', and a skilful handling of irregularly rhyming lines that leads Herbert to 'the city of chrysolite':

> Surely you found companions meet for you
> In that high place;
> You met there face to face
> Those you had never known, but whom you knew:
> Knights of the Table Round,
> And all the very brave, the very true,
> With chivalry crowned;
> The captains rare,
> Courteous and brave beyond our human air;
> Those who had loved and suffered evermuch,
> Now free from the world's touch,
> And with them were the friends of yesterday,
> Who went before and pointed you the way;
> And in that place of freshness, light and rest,
> Where Lancelot and Tristram vigil keep
> Over their King's long sleep,
> Surely they made a place for you,
> Their long-expected guest,
> Among the chosen few,
> And welcomed you, their brother and their friend,
> To that companionship which hath no end. (1)

W.N. Hodgson's 'Ave, Mater - atque Vale' tells of a young man's sense of dedication as he quits youth. The feeling is one of dedicating oneself to God's service, and the situation of college or school chapel led naturally to the imagery of the ancient vigil of knighthood, where meditation prepared the young aspirant for the trials and honours that lay ahead:

> Now on the threshold of a man's estate,
> With new depth of love akin to pain
> I ask thy blessing, while I dedicate
> My life and sword, with promise to maintain
> Thine ancient honour yet inviolate.
> Last night dream-hearted in the Abbey's spell
> We stood to sing Old Simeon's passing hymn
> When sudden splendour of the sunset fell
> Full on my eyes, and passed and left all dim,
> At once a summons and a deep farewell. (2)

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(1) Maurice Baring : 'In Memoriam, A.H.'(i.e. Auberon Herbert, killed 1916) Georgian Poetry 1916 - 17. p. 171 - 7.

(2) W.N. Hodgson : 'Ave, Mater - atque Vale', MIA p. 184.

This sense of glorious enterprise and just cause was firmly rooted in the certainty that God was on their side, that it was His just cause they espoused, that the triumph of decency and right was inevitable.

Facile sentiments were easily accommodated in an easy rhetoric, and the simple imagery and symbolism of most 1915 poems were the simple index of a naive concept of war and the unquestioned ethical base of it. But the poetry of Charles Hamilton Sorley was the exception that proved the rule. His work shows an intellectualism that was not only in contrast to, but calculatedly hostile to, the emotionalism of the contemporary response. It may be that he inherited from his father, a Professor of Philosophy at Aberdeen and Cambridge, a clarity of mind that saw beyond the fever of the moment. Or perhaps his close friendship with many individual Germans, (he was actually in Germany when the war got under way) encouraged him to see the inadequacies of current jingoism and foresee the inhumanities that were to cut at the roots of European civilisation. Whatever the reasons, Sorley opposed not only the fundamental attitudes then current but, in both theory and poetic practice, the language and technique also. In his Letters he gives ample testimony that his intellectual clarity rejected Georgian romanticism, both as an attitude and a technique:

> The voice of our poets and men of letters is finely trained and sweet to hear; it teems with sharp saws and rich sentiment: it is a marvel of delicate technique; it pleases, it flatters, it charms, it soothes: it is a living lie. (1)

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(1) C.H. Sorley : Letters , Cambridge, 1919. p. 263. See also pp. 247, 255. "I cannot help thinking that Hardy is the greatest artist of the English character since Shakespeare". "I have discovered a man called D.H. Lawrence who knows the way to write". Hardly 'Georgian' comment.

His comments on Hardy's 'Men Who March Away' and on Brooke's December Sonnets do no more than particularise this objectivity. In a letter dated November 30th, 1914, he writes:

> Curiously enough, I think that 'Men Who March Away' is the most arid poem in the book, besides being untrue of the sentiments of the ranksmen going to war: 'Victory crowns the just' is the worst line he ever wrote.....and unworthy of him who had previously disdained to insult Justice by offering it a material crown like Victory. (1)

And the following year, a few days after Brooke's death, Sorley can stand aside from the adulation and comment:

> He has clothed his attitude in fine words: but he has taken the sentimental attitude. (2)

Sorley's social realism and evaluative mind gave him a capability in subtle irony that was markedly un-Georgian, and his clear relationship to Hardy is rather an affinity than a debt. His poetry is marked by an austerity, a terse Anglo-Saxon lexis, that contrasts significantly with his contemporaries. His poetry written in 1914 - 15 - 'Whom Therefore We Ignorantly Worship', 'Deus Loquitur', 'Expectans Expectavi' and his 'Two Sonnets' on death (3) - anticipates by two years the paradoxes, ironies and ambiguities of post-Somme poetry. We can discern surely in 'A Hundred Thousand Million Mites We Go' not only a Hardyesque cosmic vision, but something of Hardy's diction and imagery:

> A hundred thousand million mites we go
> Wheeling and tacking o'er the eternal plain,
> Some black with death - and some are white with woe.
> Who sent us forth? Who takes us home again?

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(1) C.H. Sorley : Letters. Cambridge, 1919. p. 245.

(2) ibid., p. 263.

(3) C.H. Sorley : Marlborough and Other Poems, Cambridge, 1919. pp. 43, 48, 65, 67.

And there is sound of hymns of praise - to whom?
And curses - on whom curses? - snap the air,
And there is hope goes hand in hand with gloom,
And blood and indignation and despair.

And there is murmuring of the multitude
And blindness and great blindness, until some
Step forth and challenge blind Vicissitude
Who tramples on them: so that fewer come. (1)

There are flashes of anti-sentiment that illuminate his poems expressed in a technique that is anti-rhetoric. To take a couple of examples. Sorley rejects that concept of nature which saw it as the mentor and comforter of man, and he was equally antipathetic to the idea that death was noble or ennobling. Thus we find him, in the very first month of the war, writing of that Earth

that bore with joyful ease
Hemlock for Socrates (2)

And in the first of his 'Two Sonnets' on death, written in June 1915 -

Such, such is Death: no triumph: no defeat:
Only an empty pail, a slate rubbed clean,
A merciful putting away of what has been. (3)

Now what is interesting, I think, about these brief quotations is that he has produced lines that for brevity, in their rejection in theory and practice of empty rhetoric and vague abstract concepts only Isaac Rosenberg among the war poets could equal. Indeed, although I can recollect no clear indication that Sorley was really familiar with the work of the Imagists, he has produced images of graphic power that would have warmed the heart of Ezra Pound. A valid conclusion, then, is that Sorely's hostility to facile moral attitudes and 'small-holdings' verse led him intuitively towards a technique that insisted on concision and definition.

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(1) C.H. Sorley : 'A Hundred Thousand Million Mites We Go'. Marlborough, p.46.
(2) C.H. Sorley : 'All the Hills and Vales Along', ULD. p. 25.
(3) C.H. Sorley : 'Sonnet 11', MIA. p. 147.

He drew strength from the colloquial simplicity of Masefield, the austere irony of Hardy, and was impelled towards the essentially contemporary ideogrammatic method.

In 1915, however, few poets had Sorley's freedom from emotionalism. Without, for example, the sincere conviction that this was God's work, death would have been the unpalatable fact. But most accepted still the inherited beliefs of their fathers that England's cause was God's cause:

> We should not dare, O god, to pray -
> Our prayers would be as nought -
> Had we not faith we fight today
> For all thy word hath taught. (1)

The whole conception of the war at this stage as a great Crusade was tenable only on the supposition that one was dying in a just cause, that death was therefore honourable. The act of dying was enveloped in the mantle of the Supreme Sacrifice: - "the great shadowed valley" (2), "changing dreaming into sleeping" (3), "took the leave that has no ending" (4), "He in wisdom giveth unto his Beloved sleep" (5) (Note scriptural overtones), "poured out the red sweet wine of youth" (6). War was "the field where Death and Honour meet." (7) Julian Grenfell, like Brooke, was a prototype Happy Warrior, a Georgian Hemingway:

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(1) Lord Burghclere : 'Hymn in Time of War', PPER. p. 51.

(2) W.H. Littlejohn : 'A Prayer', MIA p. 284.

(3) Aubrey Herbert : 'R.B.', MIA p. 128.

(4) ibid.

(5) W.N. Hodgson : 'England to Her Sons', August. 1914.

(6) Rubert Brooke : Sonnet III, C.P. London, 1946, p. 21.

(7) Herbert Asquith : 'War's Cataract' MIA p. 144.

> Not many men would have knocked out two professional boxers and written those verses (Into Battle) in one week. He was the Happy Warrior, with no fear of death, but an intense belief in the Almighty, and in the life to come. (1)

When he was killed, there was a short poetic obituary in The Times, sent by a fellow-combatant from France. Even then, it is worth noting how Grenfell's death is glossed - "proudly gave your jewelled life" and "leapt the golden stile" (2)

Initially, death was the sacrifice that placed the soldier in communion with Christ. Cyril Winterbotham, killed while serving with the Gloucester Regiment in August, 1916, saw this identification in terms of the regulation wooden cross that was to become so much a feature of the landscape. Christ had had his cross of wood, and although the soldier's cross was small in comparison, the act of sacrifice to redeem the sins of the world elevated the dead soldier into brotherhood with Jesus:

> ..... more honourable far
> Than all the Orders is the Cross of Wood
> The Symbol of self-sacrifice that stood
> Bearing the God whose brethren you are.(3)

L/Cpl. Joseph Lee of the Black Watch also recognised this parallel. He reinforces the analogy of the Wooden Cross with the affinity of the dying soldier's last word, "Finished!" and Christ's, "It is finished." In this sacrifice the humble life, the sinful life was atoned for:

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(1) Letter from Grenfell's father, Lord Desborough, to Prof. Knight, quoted introduction to Pro Patria et Rege, London, 1915. p.XlV.

(2) 'Julian Grenfell' (Anon), B.E.F., France. The Times, June 5,1915.

(3) Cyril Winterbotham : 'The Cross of Wood': 1915. MIA p. 159.

And in the soldier's sacrifice,
I saw the Christ's in its degree:
A sinful life - let it suffice,
He laid it down for you and me.
For one a little cross of deal,
For One the Age-Enduring Tree;
Yet each frail, faltering flesh did feel
In hands and feet the wounding steel;
Each died that mankind might be free,
Each gave a life for you and me. (1)

The euphemisms and the association with the Crucifixion gave death dignity. The certainties that underlay it made it purposive. The whole splendid and heroic concept of the war in these early months rested on these illusions -

.....those eyes
That stare on life still out of death and will not close
Seeing in a flash the Crown of Honour and the Rose
Of Glory wreathed about the Cross of Sacrifice
Died radiant..... (2)

Destroy these illusions and the whole chivalric edifice was without foundation. The great change in attitude towards war and towards the Christian faith stemmed in large measure from the failure to maintain these two associated illusions, that death was purposive and death was dignified, in the face of the actualities of trench warfare.

Dying was too commonplace to retain its mystique for long: for "Who would have thought Death had undone so many?" Bodies were broken and distorted. Death was often felt to be not the Supreme Sacrifice but the Needless one. Nor was it effected by the more romantic sword and lance with which these early poets had so enthusiastically armed themselves, but by disease, by disintegration in anonymous shell-bursts, by drowning in mud, by attrition, slowly and painfully. Or it came suddenly, taking men unprepared, joking,

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(1) Joseph Lee : 'At the Dawn' Ballads of Battle (dated 1915) London 1916. pp. 31 - 2.

(2) Charles Scott Moncrieff: 'The Field of Honour'. MIA p. 175.

sleeping, literally with their trousers down. To be left "hanging on the old barbed wire" seemed a crude and grotesque kind of Crucifixion. The reality of dying could be squared less and less with preconceived notions of its utility and dignity.

It is interesting to note that the war accelerated here once again, a process that had already been begun. There is an affinity between scepticism and Imagism, and Ezra Pound's injunction to "Go in fear of abstactions" would have been given more meaningful application in 1916 than in 1913. Scepticism very much took the form of a rejection of the old abstactions, held with complacency in 1914, although vaguely conceived. "Holiness", "Nobleness", and "Honour" (1) which Brooke had so confidently predicted as the products of the moral rebirth of the nation through war, had now little meaning. And when Death ceased to be an abstraction that one could gloss in a euphemism, all the other abstactions toppled with it:

> I was always embarassed by the words 'sacred', 'glorious' and 'sacrifice' and the expression 'in vain'. We had heard them, sometimes standing in the rain, almost out of earshot,....or on proclamations,..and I had seen nothing sacred and the things that were glorious had no glory and the sacrifices were like the stockyards at Chicago, if nothing was done with the meat except to bury it. (2)

And even this elementary grace was not always possible.

As 1915 moved painfully towards 1916, there was a lull, as attempts at large-scale breakthrough gave way to a war of stalemate. Men now began to evaluate their experience, to juxtapose somewhat ironically illusions and reality, to try to square the sentiments and

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(1) Rupert Brooke : Sonnet, MIA p. 143 (here titled 'Gifts of the Dead').

(2) Ernest Hemingway : 'A Farewell to Arms' London,1935. Chpt.27. p. 143.

ideals that had been so enthusiastically endorsed in Blighty with what had happened at Ypres, Neuve Chapelle and Loos. Doubts and questions were voiced as the autumn slid into winter. C.E. Montague in 'Disenchantment' defines this mood in a significant passage:

> All these images or seats of outlived ardour, mellowed now with the acquiescence of time in the slowing down of some passionate stir in the sap of a plant, or the spirit of insects or men, joined to work on you quietly. There, where the earth and the year were taking so calmly the end of all the grand racket that they had made in their prime, why not come off the high horse that we, too, in that ingenuous season, had ridden so hard? It was not now as it had been of yore. And why pretend that it was ? (1)

But hope springs eternal, and many pushed aside their fears and disillusion as they were caught up in the great rebirth of hope that characterised the preparations for the massive Somme offensive. First of all, it was primarily a British effort. Furthermore, the preparation was so vast, that the attack surely must succeed. It was an effort that represented a concentration without precedent, of Britain's redoubtable economic, military, and moral resources, and there was consequently a resurgence of earlier hope.

It lacked, indeed, that fine edge of naive enthusiasm, but there was a genuine feeling of renewed dedication. W.N. Hodgson's 'Before Action', written on the 29th June, just before the assault was launched, although it is full of the certainty that he is about to die, contains no bitterness, no denunciation, only a quiet conviction and prayer:

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(1) C.E. Montague: Dishenchantment, London, 1968. Chpt. IX.

By beauty lavishly outpoured
And blessings carelessly received,
By all the days that I have lived
Make me a soldier, Lord, (1)

Hodgson was killed in action on the first day of the assault. There was time for neither recrimination nor revaluation.

Leslie Coulson, while the Somme battle was being waged, could still 'as he watched the white dawn gleam, to the thunder of hidden guns' feel in his being 'the old, high sanctified thrill' that came from an acceptance of universal beauty and continuity. But between the time of this poem (2) and his death on October 7th, the effect of the Somme carnage becomes apparent. In 'Judgement' he represents that he still accepts God's purpose, for 'We are but poor', uncomprehending clay', but when Judgement comes after his death, and

..... my soul to Thy Gold Gate ascend,
Then shall my soul soar up and summon Thee
To tell me <u>why</u>. And as Thou answerest,
So shall I judge Thee, God, not Thou judge me.(3)

In 'Who Made the Law' the reiterated questions are full of anger and urgency:

Who made the Law that men should die in meadows?
Who spake the word that blood should splash in lanes?
Who gave it forth that gardens should be boneyards?
Who spread the hills with flesh and blood and brains?
Who made the Law? (4)

Coulson's bitter and anguished protest in 'The God Who Waits' contrasts the old certainties of faith with the twentieth century when 'question holds the place of trust'. God begins to be identified with Jahveh:

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(1) W.N. Hodgson : 'BeforeAction' MIA p. 22.

(2) Leslie Coulson : 'The Rainbow' Aug. 8th, 1916. MIA p. 291.

(3) Leslie Coulson : 'Judgement' MIA p. 288.

(4) <u>ibid</u> : 'Who Made the Law'.

That Iron God who still unfed
Sits throned with lips that dribble red
Among the sacrificial dead.

Belching their flames between the bars,
Our fire sweeps out like scimitars.
Across the Eden of the stars.

And souls are sold and souls are bought
And souls in hellish torture wrought
To feed the mighty Juggernaut.

The dripping wheels go roaring by
And crush and kill us where we lie
Blaspheming God with our last cry. (1)

In these two months of intensive fighting Coulson, with perhaps inevitable shrillness, was sounding the keynote for the remainder of the war. The dissaffection which had been the undertone of war after Loos was irresistably strengthened by the unavailing sacrifice of the New Armies at the Somme.

To kill an enemy in time of war, as we have seen, was sanctioned by the Church, but it became a more insistent moral problem when the sheer amount of it, the patent uselessness of it, and the inhumanity concomitant in its execution in modern warfare, began to outweigh the sanctions of the Church.

C.E. Montague, in verse and prose, sought to reconcile what Wilfred Owen saw to be irreconcileable - "pure Christianity" and "pure patriotism". Montague developed a distrust of the Christian abstractions, exacerbated by the too facile jingoistic and apparently un-Christian sentiments of the Church.

> The effect on my mind was specially heightened by the contrast between the obious teaching of Christ and its practical denial by the chief exponents of official Christianity. I suppose that if there are two practical points about which Christ was clearer than any others,

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(1) ibid : 'The God Who Waits', MIA p. 285.

> it was about the moral value of poverty and the moral badness of war.....In war...I saw Bishops and Deans apparently only concerned lest they should be thought less eager to join in war dances and put on war-paint than anyone else.(1)

The obvious dichotomy between the teachings of Christ on the one hand and His Church on the other, did much to aggravate the moral dilemmas that confronted the soldier. Sassoon, in turn confronting the Bishop with some of the realities of the Front, had to console himself with His Grace's rather enigmatic reply:

> The Bishop tells us: 'When the boys come back
> They will not be the same; for they'll have fought
> In a just cause; they lead the attack
> On Anti-Christ.....
>
> 'We're none of us the same!' the boys reply.
> 'For George lost both his legs, and Bill's stone-blind,
> Poor Jim's shot through the lungs and like to die;
> And Bert's gone syphilitic, you'll not find
> A chap who's served that hasn't found some change!
> And the Bishop said: "The ways of God are strange"! (2)

What is implicit in Sassoon's condemnation is not so much that the Bishop is ignorant of the realities of modern war but ignorant of the realities of Christianity. Organised religion has lost touch with the world, and has failed to keep before itself, let alone the people it instructs, those touchstones of truth and goodness it should provide for the world.

Osbert Sitwell, with an equally heavy irony, attacks the Church for condoning the follies of the State. By acting as a clerical recruiting sergeant, far from acting in the national interest, it is playing its accustomed role of doing the wrong things for the wrong reasons.

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(1) 'Inexpert Approaches to Religion' quoted by Oliver Elton in C.E. Montague : A Memoir. London, 1929.

(2) Siegfried Sassoon : 'They' C.P. 1908 - 56 London 1961, p.23.

"We cannot and we will not end this war
Till all the younger men with martial mien
Have enter'd capitals; never make peace
Till they are cripples, on one leg, or dead!"
Then would the Bishops go nigh mad with joy,
Cantuor, Ebor, and the other ones,
Be overwhelmed with pious ecstasy.
In thanking Him we'd got a Christian,
An Englishman, still worth his salt, to talk.
In every pulpit would they preach and prance;
And our great Church would work, as heretofore,
To bring this poor old nation to its knees. (1)

But, perhaps more significantly, because the criticism was indirect, the imagery of poetry was tinged with anti-clericism. A.P. Herbert, in writing of a General's speech of congratulation after a successful engagement, translates the unwelcome fulsomeness of his eulogy:

We do not want your Sermon on Success,
Your greasy benisons on Being Smart. (2)

Even the Dutch courage supplied by the rum issued before a difficult attack is compared imaginatively to the rhetoric of a too enthusiastic clergy:

Now in the darkness, Rum, the hearty priest,
Has laid his unction to my troops. (3)

Both the letters and diaries of men at the Front indicate that the Church's position, or lack of it, forced many to create a moral attitude for themselves, and just as the attitudes of front-line officers often differed sharply from senior and staff officers, so often the attitudes of chaplains serving at the front contrasted with the pronouncements of the hierarchy and militant clergymen at home.

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(1) Osbert Sitwell : 'Armchair' ULD p. 112.

(2) A.P. Herbert : 'After the Battle' ULD p. 122.

(3) Leonard Barnes : 'Youth at Arms' ULD p. 41.

Like the troops, many of them were compelled to find their own moral position. Some, like the much-esteemed T.B. Hardy, who before his death won the M.C., the D.S.O. and the V.C., seemed to throw in their lot with the soldiers. The Rev. O. Crighton, C.F. who was killed in 1918, one sees in his letters, being pushed somewhat in the same direction:

> .....we escorted the bodies to the grave, I talked a little about the meaning of death, but I never quite know if it helps people to realise the meaning of life and its persistence. There are few people who definitely wish to deny it. But men generally take up such an extreme agnostic position with regard to it, largely as an escape from the sloppy sentimentalism of hymns and Christmas cards, that they stand by the grave of their friends, and merely shrug their shoulders. I think it is rather a splendid attitude. (1)

A great sympathy for the men under his care, a sharing of their dilemma and a similar feeling that the Church, as it is seen in its official pronouncements, has little of substance to offer them or himself, and the answer is to bypass the organised Church, no less than the Press, and to return to Scripture itself:

> I for one, and I tell the men exactly the same, utterly refuse to hate the Kaiser or any of them, or to believe that I am fighting for a glorious cause, or anything that the papers tell me, but if man learns to live a little more on the words coming out of God's, and not Lord Northcliffe's, ecclesiastics', politicians', or anyone else's mouths - the war does not really matter. (2)

The Rev. G.A. Studdert Kennedy was probably the most famous Padre serving in the war. As "Woodbine Willie" he was known all along the Western Front, and his Rough Rhymes of a Padre made a direct contemporary emotional appeal. His simple often doggerel verses opposed hypocrisy and cant yet still sought with a direct earnestness to justify the ways of God to man, particularly the men in the trenches:

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(1) LFE, p. 77

(2) LFE, p. 79.

How do I know that God is good? I don't.
I gamble like a man. I bet my life
Upon one side in life's great war. I must,
I can't stand out. I must take sides. The man
Who is a neutral in this fight is not
A man. He's bulk and body without breath,
Cold leg of lamb without mint sauce. A fool.
He makes me sick. Good Lord! Weak tea!
Cold slops!
I want to live, live out, not wobble through
My life somehow, and then into the dark.
I must have God. (1)

For him, war was no glorious divinely-inspired enterprise. It was, quite simply, a waste:

Waste of Muscle, waste of Brain,
Waste of Patience, waste of Pain,
Waste of Manhood, waste of Health,
Waste of Beauty, waste of Wealth,
Waste of Blood and waste of Tears,
Waste of Youth's most precious Years,
Waste of Ways the Saints have trod,
Waste of Glory, waste of God, -
War! (2)

With that rationalism and clarity one could fairly expect from an official censor, C.E. Montague evolved for himself a position that satisfied many men at the time, though few perhaps fully comprehended it. Confronted with the Church's failure to rise beyond a mere seconding of the motions of the State, Montague groped his way in letters, in his diaries, in his poems, to a personal though non-Christian justification for participation.

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(1) G.A. Studdert Kennedy : The Unutterable Beauty,'Faith' p. 15
London, 1957.

(2) G.A. Studdert Kennedy : ibid. 'Waste' p. 31.

> To take part in war cannot, I think, be squared with Christianity. So far the Quakers are right, but I am more sure of my duty of trying to win this war than I am that Christ was right in every part of all that he said. (1)

And many felt as Montague did, that there was no reconciliation to be effected between what Christ said and the Church said, between what Christianity demanded and patriotism demanded, yet somehow the fight was justified if living, as they thought it should be, was to be preserved, and if, indeed, they responded honestly to the demands of their own conscience:

> Yes, of course it was sin
> And no Christ would say, 'Fight
> For the right' -
> But we had to win.
>
> When the Chaplain would bluster and blow
> About laying the rod
> Of God
> On the back of 'His Foe',
>
> I knew it was all just a form
> And there was no fiery sword,
> And the Lord
> was not in the storm.
>
> Yet - to have stood aside
> Hoarding my fortunate life
> With my wife
> While the other men died!
>
> Some sort of God, good or bad,
> Would have kept me longing in vain
> To be slain
> As I am, if I had (2)

This simple poem has little real intrinsic value. Its historical value lies in the contortions of a syntax that shows a mind groping, searching, trying to find an answer, rationalising its way out of a moral impasse.

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(1) C.E. Montague : Diary dated early 1917. ed. Elton, London, 1929. p. 167.

(2) C.E. Montague : Diary, dated Dec. 1916. ed. Elton, London, 1929, p. 165.

We saw earlier, in 'Woodbine Willie's' 'Faith' (1) a similar cumulation of short simple sentences, clause on clause, qualification and rhetorical question, as the mind worked inexorably to a moral position.

But killing a man did not, in fact, constitute one of the major moral problems for the trench poets, though most of them seem to have felt that the Church should have given some ear to the Commandment, 'Thou shalt not kill'. What really brought organised Christianity into moral disrepute with the soldiers was the justifications it offered for its condonement of killing. Christianity and nationalism made rather remarkable bedfellows in the official Church synthesis, and the Church of England's insistence the Kitchener's New Army was God's Army, that the Kaiser was Anti-Christ, and that due to a divine oversight, the parenthetic 'except Germans' had somehow been omitted from the Sixth Commandment, found little support in the trenches. They were too close to the Germans to deny their humanity with such facility, and most of them found rationale for killing the enemy that still respected their basic humanity.

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(1) op. cit. p. 145.

But killing an enemy, even vast numbers of the enemy, as an act in itself, did not contribute nearly so powerfully to the collapse of religious and moral confidences as did the fact of death. It is, I think, too easy to dismiss the curative 'horror poems' of Sassoon, Owen, Edgell Rickword, Graves, with their rats, decaying corpses, the blackened stumps, the foetid odour of mangled remains, as simply the ammunition that was to explode on the conscience of a selfish and apathetic civilian population. Of course, these poems were propagandist in intent - their form and structure reflects this specifically curative purpose. But we should not allow this obvious truth to blind us to the equally important truth - that these were sensitive men who had been sickened and horrified themselves, to the depths of their being. So that they did not chose objectively those incidents that would make sensational 'copy', but were impelled to communicate that very horror that cut so painfully at the roots of their own certainties.

The degradation and mutilation of the corpse adds a dimension that is no part of dying itself. It has, perhaps, its roots in that same terror that forbids many to bequeath their bodies for medical purposes - a kind of dread of indecent exposure, a feeling that abuse of the corpus involves an abrogation of all dignity. And it is very clear that <u>how</u> a man died became a much more potent disruptive factor in the disintegration of moral and religious certainties than <u>why</u> he died:

> A boot, a steel helmet - and you dig and scratch and uncover a grey, dirty face, pitifully drab and ugly, the eyes closed, the whole thing limp and mean-looking: this is the devil of it, that a man is not only killed, but made to look so vile and filthy in death, so futile and meaningless, that you hate the sight of him. (1)

> Whether a man be killed by a rifle-bullet through the brain or blown into fragments by a high-explosive shell, may seem a matter of indifference to the conscientious objector, or to any other equally well-placed observer, who in point of fact is probably right; but to the poor fool who is a candidate for posthumous honours, and necessarily takes a more directly interested view, it is a question of importance. He is, perhaps, the victim of an illusion, like all who, in the words of Paul, are fools for Christ's sake; but he has seen one man shot cleanly in his tracks and left face downwards, dead, and he has seen another torn into bloody tatters as by some invisible beast, and these experiences had nothing illusory about them: they were actual facts. Death, of course, like chastity, admits of no degree; a man is dead or not dead, and a man is just as dead by one means as by another; but it is infinitely more horrible and revolting to see a man shattered and eviscerated, than to see him shot. (2)

It did not matter much whether the body was of friend or foe - the horrors of mangled bodies, bodies lying distorted, left unburied, stinking, hanging on the old barbed wire, green or black, grey or khaki, treated with no ceremony, no courtesy, scant respect - the dead body was the fact that moved the war away forever from all high abstractions and high-flown rhetoric. And it seemed as if the poets must likewise move to the fact, the thing. Because it was, however illogically, seen as the most vivid and dramatic denial of elementary human decency that presented itself to the trench poets, much more potent that the Church's apparent disinclination to accept the humanity of the enemy.

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(1) A. Graeme West : Diary of a Dead Officer, published posthumously, London, 1918. extract dated September, 20th, 1916.

(2) Frederic Manning : Her Privates We, London, 1964. First published, 1930. p. 12.

If there was little dignity in life in a dug-out there was none at all in death there. Owen's 'Anthem for Doomed Youth' was for 'those who die as cattle' (1)

It had been easy, from the safe distance of not-knowing, to sentimentalise about the possibility of one's own death. Sorely's position had been simply to reject the sentimental attitude, to accept death as an inevitability, but his experience of the scale and horror and degradation of death on the Western Front, was equally circumscribed:

> It is easy to be dead.
> Say only this, 'They are dead.' (2)

When some of the poets found that neither the sentimental approach nor stoical acceptance accurately transcribed the horror which the degrading death of others invoked in them, they tried to state what their position was -

> Lest we see a worse thing than it is to die,
> Live ourselves and see our friends cold beneath the sky,
> God grant we too be lying there in wind and mud and rain
> Before the broken regiments come stumbling back again (3)

- they produced generalised reflections that dissipated the horror which prompted such conclusions. These lines lacked the detail, the impact, the concretisation, that a curative intent demanded. In the quotation above, even the length of the line militated similarly against impact. Death was still, perhaps, too much of an abstraction-

> give Death the crown
> For here no emperor hath won, save He. (4)

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(1) Wilfred Owen : 'Anthem for Doomed Youth' C.P. p. 44.

(2) C.H. Sorley : 'When you see millions of the mouthless dead', ULD. p. 45.

(3) E.A. Mackintosh : 'Before the Summer', ULD. p. 34.

(4) Herbert Asquith : 'Nightfall', ULD. p. 81.

-to transcribe either the horrors that they saw or the revulsion that they felt. It seemed that only by painting such detail could they succeed, and any evasion detracted from the force of the kick that they aimed at the stomach of a complacent and ignorant civilian world. Any teacher knows the value of the telling and arresting detail, and this was poetry with a markedly didactic purpose.

> Fantastic forms, in posturing attitudes,
> Twisted and bent, or lying deathly prone.(1)

Here, such words as 'forms' and 'attitudes' lessen the graphic power.

So, when the urgent need was to communicate such revulsion as they felt, they committed themselves to an uncompromising realism.

> the livid face
> Terribly glaring up, whose eyes yet wore
> Agony dying hard ten days before;
> And fist of fingers clutched a blackening wound.(2)

> A man of mine
> lies on the wire
> And he will rot
> And first his lips
> The worms will eat.(3)

> His head
> Smashed like an eggshell and the warm grey brain
> Spattered all bloody.(4)

> I knew a man, he was my chum,
> but he grew blacker every day,
> and would not brush the flies away.(5)

> green clumsy legs
> High-booted, sprawled and grovelled along the saps
> And trunks, face downward, in the sucking mud,
> Wallowed like trodden sandbags.(6)

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(1) Max Plowman : 'The Dead Soldiers', ULD. p. 103.

(2) Siegfried Sassoon : 'The Rear Guard', C.P. p. 69.

(3) Herbert Read : 'My Company', C.P., 1966. p. 39.

(4) A.G. West : 'God, How I Hate You', HUSS. p. 142.

(5) Edgell Rickword : 'Trench Poets', HUSS. p. 112.

(6) Siegfried Sassoon : 'Counter Attack', C.P. p. 68.

Owen had no doubt that if one could only visualise the horror and degradation of seeing a man die in some of the circumstances of modern warfare one would quickly abandon all notions of the 'dulce et decorum' of death -

> If...you too could pace
> Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
> And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
> His hanging force, like a devil's sick of sin ;
> If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
> Come gurgling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
> Obscene as cancer, bitter as the end
> Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues.(1)

Richard Aldington has left us a clear account of how he, although he neither feared death nor was any longer surprised by the dead, could be shocked to the point of nausea by a man's fate once he was dead, a nausea he invokes by the word 'wobble':

> No, I'm not afraid of death
> (Not very much afraid, that is)
> Either for others or myself;
> Can watch them coming from the line
> On the wheeled silent stretchers
> And not shrink;
> But munch my sandwich stoically
> And make a joke when 'it' has passed.
>
> But - the way they wobble! -
> God! that makes one sick.
> Dead men should be so still, austere,
> And beautiful,
> Not wobbling carrion roped upon a cart(2)

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(1) Wilfred Owen : 'Dulce et Decorum Est', C.P. p. 55.

(2) Richard Aldington : 'Soliloquy I', HUSS. p. 44.

In Owen's poem, 'The Show', this sense of war as something that degraded men, British and German, into khaki and grey caterpillars that consume one another, is filled with an anguished nausea, a masochism that rises from the despair with which he recognises himself as the head of one of those 'brown strings':

> On dithering feet ungathered, more and more,
> Brown strings, towards strings of gray, with bristling spines,
> All migrants from green fields, intent on more.
> Those that were gray, of more abundant spawns,
> Romped on the rest and ate them and were eaten.
>
> I saw their bitten backs curve, loop, and straighten,
> I watched their agonies curl, lift and flatten. (1)

Frederic Manning links with this idea of degradation the idea - which also subtracts from man's essential humanity and individuality - of being at the mercy of an inscrutable and casual power:

> Whether it were justified or not, however, the sense of being at the disposal of some inscrutable power, using them for its own ends, and utterly indifferent to them as individuals, was perhaps the most tragic element in the men's present situation. It was not much use telling them that war was only the ultimate problem of all human life stated barely, and pressing for an immediate solution. When each individual conscience cried out for its freedom, that implacable thing said: "Peace, peace; your freedom is only in me!" Men recognised the truth intuitively, even with their reason checking at a fault. There was no man of them unaware of the mystery that encompassed him, for he was a part of it; he could neither separate himself entirely from it, nor identify himself with it completely. A man might rave against war; but war, from among its myriad faces, could always turn towards him one, which was his own.(2)

The last sentence reminds us of the conclusion of Owen's poem. Death falls on a 'manner of worm', a superb evocation of the casual and indiscriminate. The 'thin caterpillar' of troops is stopped in a trench, decimated, and Owen sees his own guilt and his inevitable fate in 'the fresh-severed head of it, my head':

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(1) Wilfred Owen : 'The Show', C.P. ed. Day Lewis. London 1963. p. 50.

(2) Frederic Manning : Her Privates We, London, 1964. p. 20.

And (Death) picking a manner of worm, which half had hid
Its bruises in the earth, but crawled no further,
Showed me its feet, the feet of many men,
And the fresh-severed head of it, my head.(1)

Their protest against the inhumanity of the war took many different forms. One was to examine the Christian stories and values objectively as a myth. Few were willing to do as Frederic Branford, and see the Christian myth as exemplifying values set against values embodied in earlier or alien mythologies. He saw Christ as one who offered serenity and whose supremacy was paradoxically contained in his apparent vulnerability:

Yet is the Nazerene no thane of Thor,
To play on partial fields the puppet king,
Bearing the battle down with bloody hand.
Serene He stands, above the gods of war,
A naked man where shells go thundering -
The great unchallenged Lord of No-Man's Land. (2)

But more commonly those Biblical myths which naturally recommended themselves to poets, being easily adapted to illustrate current attitudes, underwent meaningful distortion. The story of Cain and Abel, of course, as man destroyed man; the unequal struggle of David and Goliath as, in 1915 in particular, the British found themselves out-gunned at every turn; or later, the bitterness against an older generation whose follies were now being redeemed by young blood could find a parallel in the myth of Isaac, Abraham and the Ram of Pride. Robert Graves, as the British found themselves chronically short of shells, protested against the attitude that expected daily sling-shot

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(1) Wilfred Owen : 'The Show', CP. ed. Day Lewis. London, 1963. p.50

(2) Frederic Branford : 'Over the Dead', BAWP p. 52.

miracles by a distortion of the myth. He recounts the preliminaries to the combat - but the outcome is a reversal of the scriptural one:

> ....David, calm and brave,
> Holds his ground, for God will save,
> Steel crosses wood, a flash, and oh!
> Shame for Beauty's overthrow!
> (God's eyes are dim, His ears are shut.)
> One cruel backhand sabre cut -
> 'I'm hit! I'm killed!' young David cries,
> Throws blindly forward, chokes, and dies.
> And look, spike-helmeted, grey, grim,
> Goliath straddles over him. (1)

Owen similarly 'revises' 'The Parable of the Old Man and the Young' to protest against the sacrifice of one generation to expiate the sins of the previous one, and against those elders, clerical and secular, who advocated enthusiastically the prolongation of the slaughter. Having committed the youth of Europe to a war that was becoming increasingly without point, the elders - generals, politicians, even their fathers - find it seemingly preferable to sacrifice their sons rather than their pride.

> Then Abraham bound the youth with belt and straps,
> And builded parapets and trenches there,
> And stretched forth the knife to slay his son.
> When lo! an angel called him out of heaven
> Saying, lay not thy hand upon the lad,
> Neither do anything to him. Behold,
> A ram, caught in a thicket by its horns;
> Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him.
> But the old man would not do so, but slew his son,
> And half the seed of Europe, one by one. (2)

In both these poems the graphic distortion indicates rejection of the myths. And Graves' poem is a protest specifically against the munitions' supply as Owen's is against the prolongation of the slaughter. The fact that both formulate their protests in a calculated distortion

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(1) Robert Graves : 'Goliath and David', M.I.A. p. 134.

(2) Wilfred Owen : 'The Parable of the Old Man & the Young', C.P. p. 42.

of the myths is surely an implicit criticism of the corpus of that mythology. The old stories just aren't valid any longer.

It was obvious as the Somme Offensive spent itself in an exhaustion that left only strength for bitterness, that the young men who survived would turn on those older and wiser heads who had initiated and encouraged and organised the massacre. Sassoon is the great voice of this anger. Occasionally shrill and hysterical, his satire was bitter and recriminatory, his irony unsubtle and naked.

It is interesting to see, as a consequence, how he extends this youth/age bitterness so as to drive a wedge through the Trinity. If one reads his war poems through, it becomes clear that he addresses himself to Christ if his prayer is fervent, imploring help, or if his mood is desperate and he craves compassion. But if his mood is hostile, ironic, destructive of complacent values, the attacks are against God. Typical references to God - "God's blank heart", "The ways of God are strange", "Thank God they had to amputate!" can be found in 'Break of Day', 'They' and 'The One-Legged Man' (1) We find him writing on July 3rd, 1916, with the Somme Offensive just begun:

> Tommorrow we must go
> To take some cursed wood....O world God Made! (2)

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(1) Siegfried Sassoon : CP, 1908 - 56, pp. 82, 23, 25.

(2) ibid. 'At Carnoy', p.22 see also 'The Investiture', C.P. p. 80.

The references to Christ rise out of a different emotional context - "O Jesu, make it stop" in 'Attack' or "O Christ, they're coming at us!" in 'Counter Attack' (1) The mood of "O world God made" is of despair beyond hope. But even when the situation and the date, as in 'Stand-To: Good Friday Morning', would naturally promote this despair, it seems to me that his unorthodox concluding plea for a wound, as a condition of belief in the Resurrection, still accepts the compassion of Christ for man:

> Deep in water I splashed my way
> Up the trench to our bogged front line.
> Rain had fallen the whole damned night.
> O Jesu, send me a wound today,
> And I'll believe in Your bread and wine,
> And get my bloody old sins washed white! (2)

Owen, in 'Inspection', handles the same concept as in the last line above. But the young soldier who is 'confined to camp' for having a dirty mark on his uniform, a mark which is a bloodstain, his own blood, considers that it is not his sins but the world's being expiated, and prefers "white-washed" to "washed white"

> "The world is washing out its stains," he said.
> "It doesn't like our cheeks so red:
> Young blood's its great objection.
> But when we're duly white-washed, being dead,
> The race will bear Field Marshal God's inspection." (3)

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(1) ibid. pp. 71, 68.

(2) ibid. p. 24.

(3) Wilfred Owen : 'Inspection', CP. ed. Day Lewis, London, 1963. p. 79.

Field-Marshal God and Field-Marshal Haig seemed equally valid targets for the subaltern poets' anger. If there was a God - and there seemed as little evidence that he existed as there was that Haig existed - he was remote, back at base, and the only evidence of his existence was in the consequence of his decisions and his apparent indifference to human life. This was not only the God of the Old Testament in opposition to Christ's Love in the New Testament, but an extension of the emphatic acrimony that Youth felt towards Age, that was so much a characteristic of the protestants from late 1916 onwards. Owen makes perhaps the most overt statement of this in 'Soldier's Dream'. In this vision, although the poetry is disappointing Owen, God and Christ are assigned roles in direct opposition. Youth and Christ's concept of love could terminate the bloodshed; but God is now firmly identified with those selfish elders who, for whatever motives, advocate a continuation of the struggle:

> I dreamed kind Jesus fouled the big-gun gears;
> And caused a permanent stoppage in all bolts;
> And buckled with a smile Mausers and Colts;
> And rusted every bayonet with His tears.
> And there were no more bombs, of ours or Theirs,
> Not even an old flint-lock, nor even a pikel.
> But God was vexed, and gave all power to Michael;
> And when I woke he'd seen to our repairs. (1)

Another significant index of the fast-changing moral temper is provided by the developing use of the crucifixion symbol. We have seen how earlier poems like Cyril Winterbotham's 'The Cross of Wood' or Joseph Lee's 'At the Dawn' or Charles Scott Moncrieff's 'The Field of Honour' used the cross symbol as an expression of the ennobling and elevating effects of self-sacrifice, a sacrifice like Christ's to redeem the world. (2).

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(1) Wilfred Owen : 'Soldier's Dream', CP, London, 1963. p. 84.

(2) See earlier in this section, pp. 136 - 7.

Then it had been seen as a glad sacrifice for a world worth redemption. But as the realities of dying under the conditions of trench warfare made an impact - grotesque crucifixions that denied human dignity, sacrifices too numerous to be justified - this early use gave way to a less subjective, less rhetorical, more compassionate one. Most of the poets were commissioned, with a bourgeois background, and they began to see that the real sacrifices offered were the legions of ordinary young men they commanded, and in whose sacrifice they themselves participated. That is, there was a specific officer-class guilt that induced its own particular moral dilemma, which was that while feeling themselves sacrificed in a war they no longer believed in, they in turn condoned this by sacrificing others. This was why Sassoon made his celebrated gesture of refusing to return to the Front; it is also why he ultimately did so.

But previous to that, in a poem 'The Redeemer' he had clearly acknowledged his Christ in the ordinary soldier spotlighted by a flare, carrying a plank up to the lines - a common enough chore for soldiers who were 'resting':

> He stood before me there;
> I say that he was 'Christ'; stiff in the glare;
> And leaning forward from his burdening task,
> Both arms supporting it; his eyes on mine
> Stared from the woeful head that seemed a mask
> Of mortal pain in Hell's unholy shrine.
>
> I say that he was Christ, who wrought to bliss
> All groping things with freedom bright as air,
> And with His mercy washed and made them fair.
> Then the flame sank, and all grew black as pitch,
> While we began to struggle along the ditch;
> And some one flung his burden in the muck,
> Mumbling: "O Christ Almighty, now I'm stuck!" (1)

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(1) Siegfried Sassoon: 'The Redeemer', CP, 1908 - 56. P. 16.

Herbert Read, from the identical situation, is led to the same conclusion in 'My Company'. (1) Although his Christ is plural, the details are the same, plank, flare, curse - and Read's position in relation to the men under his control is that of Sassoon:

My men go wearily
With their monstrous burdens.
They bear wooden planks
And iron sheeting
Through the area of death.

When a flare curves through the sky
They rest immobile.

Then on again,
Sweating and blaspheming -
"Oh, bloody Christ!"

"My men, my modern Christs,
Your bloody agony confronts the world." (2)

Given a moral position so similar, and the experiential data so similar also, it is perhaps worth commenting on the ultimate differences between these two extracts, one Georgian and the other Imagist. The sequence of images that Read produces to describe the situation have a clarity that Sassoon's poem lacks. Because of his freedom from commitment to rhyme he is able to concentrate on these images. Sassoon, on the other hand, tends to lose something of impact in such lines as "While we began to struggle along the ditch" - one wonders if Sassoon would have distracted us from The Redeemer in this way had he not required a rhyme. On the other hand, Sassoon has captured some enriching detail - "leaning forward from his burdening task, both arms supporting it" - that makes his vision less a static thing than Read's.

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(1) Herbert Read: 'My Company', C.P. London, 1966. pp. 37 - 40.

(2) ibid : p. 39.

The image is of Christ carrying his cross to Golgotha, the agony on his face, but also caught in the lines of his whole body. There is a similar distinction to be drawn between Sassoon's use of 'Hell's unholy shrine' and Read's 'area of death': Sassoon offers the paradox of Christ in Hell and supports it with the rich association of 'unholy shrine', but Read offers the almost mathematical neutrality of 'area'. The effectiveness of this derives from its location in the poem. The sudden bright arc of the flare is heightened by its placing between the neutrality of 'area' and the soldiers who 'rest immobile'. Yet when Read is impelled to his anguished declaration at the end, it is a confession that a strict adherence to imagistic practice would not have enabled him to engineer this conclusion.

As the war continued, the sense of guilt that resulted from this identification grew stronger. They felt more like Judas or Pilate than Christ. It was this guilt that informed Owen's letter to Osbert Sitwell:

> For fourteen hours yesterday I was at work - teaching Christ to lift his cross by numbers, and how to adjust his crown; and not to imagine his thirst till after the last halt. I attended his supper to see that there were no complaints; and inspected his feet that they should be worthy of the nails. I see to it that he is dumb and stands at attention before his accusers. With a piece of silver I buy him every day, and with maps I make him familiar with the topography of Golgotha.(1)

I feel that this is one of the most 'poetic' things Owen ever wrote. The ambiguity of his relationship to these men has produced an enriching ambiguity in his imagery as the biblical and military blend and coalesce. The duties listed shape the prose towards free verse. And it is, I suggest, one of the most modernist 'poems' Owen wrote.

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(1) Wilfred Owen : Letter dated July 14th, 1918. Collected Letters, ed. Owen & Bell, London, 1967. p. 562.

In the September of 1918, after his convalescence at Craiglockhart, Owen rejoined his battalion on the Ancre; very probably it was here that he saw the damaged crucifix round which so many ironies and paradoxes that he associated with the Church centred.

One ever hangs where shelled roads part.
In this war He too lost a limb,
But his disciples hide apart;
And now the soldiers bear with Him.

Near Golgotha strolls many a priest,
And in their faces there is pride
That they were flesh-marked by The Beast
By whom the gentle Christ's denied.

The scribes on all the people shove
And bawl allegiance to the state,
But they who love the greater love
Lay down their life; they do not hate. (1)

This poem is significant not so much for its intrinsic poetic merits, for it obviously bears the marks of haste, but because in it many of the contemporary attitudes coalesce into a positive theological statement. Paradoxically, in the first stanza, it is Christ who has grown to the plight of the soldiers: 'He too lost a limb', as the statue is damaged, and his disciples, the nucleus of the Church, 'hide apart', i.e. He also is forsaken by the Church. His communion now is with 'the soldiers', and I don't think it is fanciful to see in this oblique allusion to the changed relationship of the modern soldier from those who diced for pieces of silver. The whole relationship has changed, and the phrase 'bear with Him' suggests a wise range of meanings, all of them however based on a new-formed mutual compassion.

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(1) Wilfred Owen : 'At a Calvary', C.P. ed. Day Lewis. London, 1963. p. 82.

The Priests, like Abraham, (1) are influenced rather by the Ram of Pride and it is pride, nationalistic pride in particular, that denies 'the gentle Christ'. For by May, 1917 Owen had seen clearly that nationalism and Christianity were incompatible:

> Already I have comprehended a light which will never filter into the dogma of any national church: namely, that one of Christ's essential commands was, Passivity at any price!(2)

So long as scribes 'bawl allegiance to the state', and advocate hatred in Christ's name, the Church in fact denies, for Owen, essential Christianity. And all that is left for those who wish to adhere to Christ's teaching is conscientious objection. To realise all this, to go on killing, to lead others less thoughtful and less sensitive to kill also, was a betrayal not only of Christ but of self. Hence, Owen was'a conscientious objector with a very seared conscience.'(3)

I have discusssed previously the general aesthetic criticism as Yeats defined it in his Preface to the Oxford Book of Modern Verse(4) that, "Passive suffering is not a theme for poetry." The developing use of the central crucifixion image associated with passive suffering has been seen as fortifying this criticism, and rather remarkably, I think, many critics of the poetry of 1914-18 have followed Yeats in this. This seems to me to compound two felonies: firstly, to accept this generalisation as critically valid, and secondly to misread most of the relevant poetry as instancing it.

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(1) 'The Parable of the Old Man and the Young', CP. p. 42.

(2) Letter, dated May 16th, 1917. (italics mine.) Collected Letters, p.461.

(3) Wilfred Owen : letter, dated 16th May, 1917. Collected Letters, p.461.

(4) W.B. Yeats : Preface to the Oxford Book of Modern Verse, London, 1936, p. xxxiv.

J.H. Johnstone, though his scholarly examination of the relevant poetry has much critical insight, thus particularises Yeats' view:

> The modern soldier is portrayed as a passive and often degraded victim of circumstances.(1)

He then quotes three poems by Sassoon to support his statement 'Lamentations', 'Suicide in the Trenches' and 'The General'. Later he expands his argument:

> A voluntary sacrifice for worthy ends usually arouses admiration as well as a degree of pity; those who willingly sacrifice themselves are heroes, not victims. A passive sacrifice for ends so remote that they cannot be identified as a product of the sacrifice can arouse only pity; those who are sacrificed are victims, not heroes. The poetry of modern warfare may be in the pity, but neither pity nor self-pity can inspire great poetry.(2)

But Owen's pity was not just compassion for his suffering men; It was for a Christianity that had become irrelevant, for a world without real purpose or morality. It was his vision, and I can see no reason why it should not inspire great poetry. In fact, it did. But above all, I feel there is a failure to respect the full significance of the paradox of 'glum heroes' (3) in the post-Somme poets, and Johnstone's choice of the three Sasson poems is perhaps indicative of this. For in terms of the Crucifixion, Christ was not a passive victim. Firstly, he chose to die. Secondly, he died for a clearly defined purpose, to redeem the world. Finally, despite this, he cried out in protest against it while it was happening, a cry of despair from a sense of being lost (O God, God why hast Thou forsaken me?).

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(1) J.H. Johnston : English Poetry of the First World War, Princeton, 1963. p. 10.

(2) ibid : p. 184.

(3) The phrase comes from Sasoon's 'Base Details', C.P. p. 75.

Owen, Sassoon, Herbert Read and those later poets who used the crucifixion image all saw that the ordinary soldier (who was not, incidentally, a Mental Case nor S.I.W. nor a Suicide in the Trenches) was both hero and victim. The whole complex relationship was too involved for any handy black/white separation. For poets, who felt themselves to be Christ/Pontius Pilate/Judas, could appreciate that the ordinary soldier was the Hero/victim or, as Alex. Comfort saw him, 'the Promethean Infantryman, both Christ and Crucifier.' And although the ordinary soldier's attempts to define why he was fighting would have lacked clarity or merely reproduced the conditioning to which he had been subjected by Press, State and Church, there seems little doubt that the poets saw his death and sacrifice as meaningful, his conduct as heroic, as aesthetically valid as the death of Christ. In fact, Sassoon makes it quite clear that the subalterns' attitude was a complex of anger, pity, and an admiration for the positive virtues that the ordinary soldier displayed:

> The secret burden that is always mine -
> Pride in their courage; pity for their distress;
> And burning bitterness
> That I must take them to the Accursed Line.(1)

What they did feel was that the average soldier struggled on when his objectives were no longer those for which the war had been initiated, and which now the civilian world did not comprehend, but his continued involvement was for something more positive than a mere inability to extricate himself from an intolerable situation.

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(1) Sassoon : C.P. 1908 - 56. London, 1961. p. 93.

Johnston's remark, therefore, that -

> Sassoon's infantrymen, for example, succumb to hysteria ('Lamentations') take their own lives('Suicide in the Trenches'), or perish in an ill-conceived attack ('The General') (1)

- must be seen clearly for the hotch-potch of misrepresentation that it is. 'The General' is a technically superb poem that lays blame where Sassoon felt it should be laid, at Haig's door, and that despite the loyalty and affection the ordinary soldiers persisted in towards the man who was the traditional hero, the leader.

> "Good-morning; good-morning!" the General said
> When we met him last week on our way to the line.
> Now the soldiers he smiled at are most of'em dead,
> And we're cursing his staff for incompetent swine.
> "He's a cheery old card," grunted Harry to Jack
> As they slogged up to Arras with rifle and pack.
>
> But he did for them both by his plan of attack.(2)

This short, colloquial, almost epigrammatic poem, generally held to be an attack on Sir Douglas Haig, has a technical excellence that is perhaps undervalued because of its very simplicity and directness. In it, Sassoon assigns to 'the General' ultimate responsibility for such carnages as Arras.

The clever repetition of 'Good-morning' at once establishes the hearty joviality, the patronising bluster that underlie the General's greeting, and he can afford to be affable, for the inference of the second line is that the troops meet him on <u>their</u> way to the trenches. It is presumably not his destination.

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(1) J.H. Johnston : <u>English Poetry of the First World War.</u> Princeton, 1964. p. 10.

(2) Siegfried Sassoon : 'The General' <u>C.P.1908 - 56</u>. London, 1961. p. 75.

The colloquial 'em' for 'them' has the double effect of introducing a kind of casual quality into the poem, and at the same time, by running 'most of 'em' together emphasising 'Smiled at' and 'dead', so that his smiling becomes a kind of kiss of death. But we note that the soldiers blame not the General, but his staff, for 'incompetent swine' (a rather outdated phrase, and possibly more the officer-poets than the soldiers').

The choice of 'card' is good, because it is a term rooted in some kind of affection. It is reinforced by 'cheery' and 'old', used here in its vague way as a term of affection, as 'Old Bill'. Harry and Jack, by their ordinary names are the Everyman of No Man's Land. The qualities they bring to the war, patience, determination, a quiet courage, are all contained in Sassoon's use of 'grunted' and 'slogged'.

The timing of the last line is superb. Sassoon gives the last line emphasis by setting it out on its own, yet holds it into the poem, and makes it the final and inevitable statement of the poem by his use of the triple rhyme. The use of the slangy 'did for' adds to that casual tone we mentioned earlier. These expressions and usages are not only contemporary military usages, but perhaps suggest to us something of Haig's casual commitment of thousands to cruel and wasteful death. Whatever Haig's reputation may be among civilians at home, whatever vague affections may persist among the rank and file, Sassoon lays at his door, in an unforgettable manner, a final and awful responsibility. But Johnston's choice of 'Suicide in the Trenches' and 'Lamentations' seems to me to be based on a similar facile reading of the poems. 'Suicide in the Trenches' for a start, is not about an ordinary soldier. It is about a simple country boy, whose simplicity is only partly that spontaneous joy in living of

'the flaxen-headed ploughboy', but partly also a kind of mental simplicity, a sub-normality. He not only "whistled early with the lark" but "grinned at life in empty joy". In short, he perhaps should never have been at the Front at all, for he has no intellectual resilience to combat the horror of his environment. Thus,

> In winter trenches, cowed and glum,
> With crumps and lice and lack of rum,
> He put a bullet through his brain,
> No one spoke of him again. (1)

The tragedy for the ordinary soldier is that the horrible circumstances of war have required him to be a spectator at this sad event. And 'No one spoke of him again' not through shame, or as an act of censure, but because bearing such silent witness has become one of the psychological pressures that operate on the ordinary soldier. In the last stanza Sassoon's anger against the'smug-faced crowds' is finally tempered by a compassion for those who do know "The hell where youth and laughter go", referring surely to those whose youth and laughter is consumed in witnessing such poignant events as this suicide, rather than to the suicide himself.

The situation in 'Lamentations' is similar:

> I found him in a guard room at the Base.
> From the blind darkness I had heard his crying
> And blundered in. With puzzled, patient face
> A sergeant watched him; it was no good trying
> To stop it; for he howled and beat his chest.
> And, all because his brother had gone West,
> Raved at the bleeding war; his rampant grief
> Moaned, shouted, sobbed and choked, while he was kneeling
> Half-naked on the floor. In my belief
> Such men have lost all patriotic feeling. (2)

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(1) Sassoon : 'Suicide in the Trenches', C.P. p. 78.

(2) Sassoon : C.P. p. 76.

The circumstances of the soldier's grief, the title, suggest the lament of Saul for Jonathan. Both the sergeant and the poet feel their hopeless inadequacy in the face of such grief. The sergeant's face is puzzled, trying to understand, and his inadequacy is the human inadequacy. But he does not condemn. The poet, conscious of himself as an intruder, can channel his inadequacy into a bitter irony directed against all who might condemn such anguish. He moves from 'all because' to the unsubtle bitter irony at the end, anticipating the kind of colloquial criticisms of the soldier's conduct that would be offered - 'all because his brother had gone West', 'raved at the bleeding war' - by some of his fellow-soldiers. But the last line is a civilian condemnation. And perhaps too Sassoon wishes to suggest to us that the raw, terrifying, uncontrollable anguish he has just witnessed is at least a more honest emotion than the spurious 'patriotic feeling' it replaced. The references to 'kneeling' and 'half-naked' suggest sackcloth and ashes. In other words, this is a man's moment of agonised being, and what can the sergeant or any of us do but endure witnessing it in silence. But to suggest this is "Sassoon's infantryman" is nonsense. It is human anguish in crisis; there are immediate human reactions in presence of it; there are reactions at remove to hearing about it. And there is the poet, linking these together.

The tendency to make such distinctions between 'hero' and 'victim' seems to me to be linguistic rather than real: Whether a sacrifice is voluntary and meaningful, or passive and for no clearly comprehended end, seems to me irrelevant. For it is not, in modern warfare, the circumstances that dictate whether a man is 'victim' or 'hero' - all soldiers, caught up in a struggle so comprehensive, manipulated by forces so powerful and remote, are, in a sense, victims. They become

heroes because of the personal, human qualities they bring to their circumstances. And it is perhaps worth noting that George Dangerfield cast them historically for just such an ambiguous role:

> Until the very outbreak of war, the poets stayed unresponsive to the changing times; stubborn, sweet, unreal, they were the last victims and the last heroes of Liberal England. (1)

By this time Sassoon had become only too bitterly conscious of the inadequacy of established religion. The Church was too fulsome in its endorsement of 'such patriotic feelings' and lent not only its weight but its terminology. It seemed demonstrably out of touch with the realities of the situation:

> As far as I could see there was more real religion in the GOLDEN TREASURY than in a Church which only approved of military-aged men when they were in khaki...(2)

> At Charing Cross a woman handed me a bunch of flowers and a leaflet by the Bishop of London who earnestly advised me to lead a clean life and attend Holy Communion. (3)

> The Archbishop of Canterbury was easier to deal with...I imbibed his 'Message to the Nation about the War and the Gospel': "Occasions may arise," he wrote, "when exceptional obligations are laid upon us...I have no hesitation in saying that in the need which these weeks present, men and women may with a clear conscience do field-work on Sundays." Remembering the intense bombardment in front of Arras on Easter Sunday, I wondered if the Archbishop had given the sanction of the Gospel for that little bit of Sabbath field-work. (4)

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(1) George Dangerfield : The Strange Death of Liberal England, London, 1961. p. 430.

(2) Siegfried Sassoon : Memoirs of an Infantry Officer, Faber Ed. London, 1965. p. 231.

(3) ibid : p. 171.

(4) Siegfried Sassoon : ibid. p. 171.

To Sassoon, this patent irrelevance of organised religion was a matter for satire. Although Owen before the war had abandoned established religion, he remained a fundamentally religious man in a way that Sassoon did not. Owen can only really make his despair over religion's irrelevance into poetry in terms of the Christian myth itself. Its loss signified a revolution in Sassoon's political and social attitudes, but for Owen the loss of religious faith represented a personal tragedy, created a hiatus that had to be filled in the centre of his being. Consequently Owen's commitment to the ideal of a 'greater love' was always deeper and more central than Read's or Sassoon's. The ironies and paradoxes in his later work derive in large measure from the consciousness that he has had to abstract the concept of Christ's love from its traditional Christian context. His concession of the irrelevance of Christianity as maintained by the Christian Church was an anguished one, and in his concern with suffering and sacrifice his terms of reference remained Christian. It was in the contrast between this myth and the realities of sacrifice he knew that one finds the roots of his pity. And Owen realised that his sense of a 'greater love' was conceptually close to the very heart of Christianity, but cut across the canting of a nationalistically charged religion:

> Christ is literally in no man's land; there men often hear his voice. Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life - for a friend. Is it spoken in English only and French? I do not believe so. (1)

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(1) Wilfred Owen : letter dated May 16th, 1917. Collected Letters, p. 461.

Like C.E. Montague's private, who said, "I've been a Christian all my life, but this war is a bit too serious," (1) Owen fully accepted that the Church had been found wanting. But he accepted also the consequence of this inadequacy - that the long-term effect would be the ultimate and irrevocable disintegration of Christian values:

> So the Church Christ was hit and buried
> Under its rubbish and its rubble.
> In cellars, packed-up saints lie serried,
> Well out of hearing of our trouble.
>
> One Virgin still immaculate
> Smiles on for war to flatter her.
> She's halo'd with an old tin hat,
> But a piece of hell will batter her. (2)

This short poem suggests that the Church Christ is being destroyed not only by the war ('rubble') but by the weight of its own dogmatic failures, its misinterpretations and misrepresentations, ('rubbish'); 'packed-up saints lying serried' is an obvious pun: not only are the saints crated, 'packed-up' for safety during the war, in cellars, but they have abdicated, 'packed-up', and are now thus as dead in their neat rows in storage as those lines neatly 'serried' by machine-gun fire during the Somme Offensive. Only one Virgin remains, one statue, immaculate, but her destruction is equally inevitable. This Virgin obviously symbolises the Roman Catholic Church, which Owen sees as the last survivor of established Christianity, 'flattered' at the moment by the collapse of other denominations, her halo now rather jocularly an 'old tin hat' and a 'piece of hell' her ultimate destiny.

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(1) C.E. Montague : Disenchantment, London, 1968.

(2) Wilfred Owen : 'Le Christianisme, C.P. p. 83.

There is corroboration for Owen's view in an article, "What do Soldiers Believe" by An Officer, in The Nation.(1) Having asserted dogmatically -

> Organised religion seems to have no influence whatever on the soldier.

- the anonymous Officer states with certainty that religion has maintained a significance denominationally variable, in the order of Roman Catholicism, Nonconformism, Church of England. He continues :

> ....on the whole, Christianity has singularly little influence on the mass of the men in the ranks, and since most of them have lately been in civil life, that is tantamount to saying that Christianity has singularly little influence on the whole life of these islands. (2)

The most lasting relic of the Church of Scotland was a modified revival of the Calvinist doctrine of Predestination, a doctrine cherished by the Old Army, as a belief that every bullet had somebody's number on it.

Such perhaps rather negative tribute to the relative staying power of Catholicism is given a more positive meaning in the example of such a devout spirit as Charles Scott Moncrieff. His Memories and Letters (3) instance the effectiveness of his religious faith in containing the worst horrors of the war:

> Since rejoining at Duddingston, he had been anxious to make some provision, hitherto lacking, for church attendance for the R.C. men in the Battalion. He told some of them on Christmas Eve to let it be known that any who liked might parade voluntarily, and he would march them down to the midnight Mass at Portobello. He found over 200 waiting for him - one a convalescent wounded, who kept up manfully, in carpet slippers, with the other over the ice-covered roads. (4)

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(1) An Officer: 'What Do Soldiers Believe?', The Nation, Dec. 15th, 1917. Vol. XXII. p. 380.

(2) ibid.

(3) C.K. Scott Moncrieff, Memories & Letters ed. J.M. Scott Moncrieff and L.W. Lunn. London, 1931.

(4) ibid. p. 120.

Such recollections remind us that despite all the difficulties Moncrieff's faith remained a thing inviolable. But the difficulties were real: Writing from France to a friend, H.R. Pyatt, with whom he had studied English at Edinburgh University, he admits:

> One hasn't the ease here to focus one's mind either for reading or for writing in a Christian manner. (1)

But historically, 1917-8 was a little premature for such conversion to Roman Catholicism as Scott Moncrieff's to be really fashionable, and most young poets operating from an ethical base of orthodox Christianity had to achieve a personal position they could square with their war experience, and their techniques evolved accordingly. Sassoon never really aspired to fashion a new ethic. His poetry was a destructive force - and his best tools were for demolition.

But satire did not come easily to a Georgian sensibility, for its social purpose was alien to that eclecticism we associate with latter-day romanticism. And Sassoon was right to claim for his 'trench sketches' that they were 'the first things of their kind' (2) It is, I think, difficult to see much basis for the contention that

> in Sassoon's moments of most bitter anger his poetic methods remained traditional, however startling his sentiments. (3)

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(1) ibid. p. 44. Between the time of this quotation and the memoir quoted above, Scott Moncrieff became a convert to Catholicism.

(2) Sassoon :Memoirs of an Infantry Officer, Faber Ed. London,1965.

(3) Bernard Bergonzi : Heroes' Twilight, London, 1965. p. 92.

His poetic methods can surely only refer to some synthesis of form, tone, diction etc. Professor Bergonzi's statement accords little with his own later penetrating assessment that Sassoon's war poetry "has a deliberate simplicity and hard outline that recalls the impact of good poster art" (1) or that Sassoon was "forced by the need for exactness in registering front-line experience into a degree of colloquial language and a conversational tone that was still a novelty in contemporary verse." (2) It is true, as Bergonzi says, that Sassoon was never "a poetic modernist, or even, like Owen, a conscious experimenter" (3) but this should not inhibit us from acknowledging the radical modifications that the demands of his protest effected in his technique. It is pointless to catalogue Sassoon as a Georgian-turned-satirist: This would be a quite meaningless term. A number of critics - Humbert Wolfe, David Worcester, James Sutherland - have attempted to define the nature and quality of satirical poetry. What it is interesting to note is that much of what we have read as criticism of Sassoon's war poetry is also a rejection of the 'canon' of satire as set out by these critics. There are two general points one would make: First, that English criticism has never been at ease with satire, and, second, that I personally am not here concerned with the niceties of distinction one can draw between satire and irony, innuendo and invective.

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(1) ibid : p. 96.

(2) ibid : p. 102.

(3) ibid : p. 102.

> The spectrum-analysis of satire runs from the red of invective at one end to the violet of the most delicate irony at the other. (1)

We must note immediately that Sutherland consistently assigns a curative intent to the satirist:

> You cannot be a satirist just by telling the truth; you are a satirist when you consciously compel men to look at what they have tried to ignore, when you wish to destroy their illusions or pretences, when you deliberately tear off the disguise and expose the naked truth. (2)

This is almost a definition of much of Sassoon's poetic intent. It was his aim to make 'facing facts' obligatory, and in this situation, the facts are always unpleasant.

> (the satirist) comes knocking us up from a comfortable sleep to face hard and uncomfortable facts. (3)

Sutherland deduces two consequences of this curative intent. The satirist may see the whole truth but he does not present this; he is concerned with the presentation of a partial truth by the nature of things. Thus, in terms of Sassoon's war poetry it is irrelevant to demand a comprehensive scope and historical perspective when he is limited by the curative nature of satiric expression.

> What, then, does the satirist see, for he certainly sees something? Not the whole truth, but one aspect of the truth; not the whole man, but one side of him. He is the advocate pleading a cause, and to secure our agreement he is prepared to ignore much of the evidence and exaggerate the rest. The satirist proceeds characteristically by drastic simplification, by ruthlessly narrowing the area of vision, by leaving out of account the greater part of what must be taken into consideration if we are to realise the totality of a situation. (4)

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(1) David Worcester : The Art of Satire, London, 1940. p. 16.

(2) James Sutherland : English Satire (Clark Lectures, 1956) Cambridge, 1962. p. 11.

(3) ibid. p. 6.

(4) ibid. p. 16.

Sutherland sees the second consequence of this persuasive purpose as being a poetry of rhetoric:

> The art of the satirist is an art of persuasion, and persuasion is the chief function of rhetoric...I take satire, therefore, to be a department of rhetoric. (1)

Connotations of, for example, 'persuasion' and 'rhetoric' are too numerous to allow this generalisation to be very helpful. What Sutherland's comments do suggest is that many of the critical attacks on Sassoon's war verse derive in large measure from a general critical myopia, and that Sassoon, as a satirist, must be primarily a technician. On this latter point Sutherland is more specific:

> If(the satirist) has his moments of vision they are concerned with means rather than ends; he discovers..not what he is to say, but how he is to say it. (2)

Sutherland is concerned to make the distinction between satire and Romanticism, "the Wordsworths and the Tolstoys" whose vision is "the magnesium flare that suddenly reveals what has lain hidden from our sight" (3) The image here is interesting. For was it not just such a magnesium flare that lit up No Man's Land in 'The Redeemer'[4], one of Sassoon's earlier and more Romantic war poems, a non-satiric poem that identified the common soldier as Christ. A reading of this poem and of Sassoon's satiric poetry will, I think, support the conclusions that the satirist starts with a truth that he knows and induces the reader to accept it whereas the lyric poet has his vision, or seems to, simultaneously with the reader. The difference is between'uncovering for'and'discovering with.'

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(1) ibid. p. 5.

(2) ibid. p. 15.

(3) ibid. p. 15.

(4) Siegfried Sassoon : 'The Redeemer', C.P. 1908 - 56. p. 16.

Sassoon's affinity was soon with Max Gate rather than the Poetry Bookshop. In Hardy's The Dynasts (1906) the individual theme of suffering had merged into a vision of the world in travail as Sassoon's anguish hailed similarly from a cosmic vision of a world divided. Hardy's Wessex was the Over-Character that brooded over his work, as No Man's Land cast its shadow over Sassoon's. And his 'mutinous cries' remind us of Hardy's 'obstinate questionings'. If Hardy in 'In Tenebris' had insisted that"the way to the Better.... exacts a full look at the Worst", (1) Sassoon was prepared for just such a look.

And in structure Sassoon's protest poems have much in common with the short ironical 'tales' in Satires of Circumstance (1913). Both write short ironic narratives which are in essence dramatic. Both use short snippets of dialogue as a method of narrative progression; both work towards a conclusion, often colloquial and idiomatic:

> Ah! here he comes with his button-hole rose.
> Good God - I must marry him I suppose. (2)

> Well, bliss is ignorance: what's the harm. (3)

This colloquialism serves structurally as the climax of the poem.(4)

And as with Hardy or Housman, Sassoon often derives a potent effect from the tension between the simplicity of the language, both lexis and syntax,and the cataclysmic vision and emotional stress of which the language is the controlled expression.

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(1) Hardy : 'In Tenebris', C.P. London, 1952. p. 154.

(2) ibid. : 'In the Room of the Bride Elect', p. 392.

(3) ibid. : 'At a Watering Place', p. 393.

(4) Owen : Collected Letters, p.487. "Sassoon admires Thos. Hardy more than anybody living".

To see Sassoon's contribution to changing concepts of poetic purpose and technique simply as one of lexis, like Brooke's earlier attempt in, say, 'A Channel Passage', (1) a straight and somewhat self-conscious substitution of onomatopoeically repellent words for the restrained and conventional tones of Georgianism, in some superficial pursuit of realism, is unjust. Sassoon could hardly have achieved the success he did as a war-poet with no more than a brutalising of lexis. In fact, we can see that he reinforced this obvious change with a new emphasis on the verbal rather than on the adjectival-nominal. When one contrasts Masefield's 'Cargoes', which has no finite verb in its three stanzas, with the opening of Sassoon's 'A Working Party' the dual lexical change is easily heard:

> Three hourse ago he blundered up the trench,
> Sliding and poising, groping with his boots;
> Sometimes he tripped and lurched against the walls
> With hands that pawed the sodden bags of chalk. (2)

It indicates a poetry that is narrative-dramatic rather than lyric-descriptive. Sassoon hurled sequences of harsh sounds, often verbal in origin even when used adjectivally. He pounded the ears and eyes of an audience accustomed to more neutral restraints:

> The Place was rotten with dead; green clumsy legs
> High-booted, sprawled and grovelled along the saps
> And trunks, face downward in the sucking mud,
> Wallowed like trodden sandbags loosely filled;
> And naked sodden buttocks, mats of hair,
> Bulged, clotted heads, slept in the plastering slime,
> And then the rain began - the jolly old rain! (3)

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(1) Rupert Brooke : 'A Channel Passage', C.P. ed. Keynes. London, 1956. p. 113.

(2) Sassoon : 'A Working Party', C.P. 1908 - 56. p. 19.

(3) ibid : 'Counter Attack'. p. 68.

This is neither as easy nor as artless as criticism sometimes implies. It is worth noting, for example, how the 'clumsy -sprawled - grovelled - - wallowed' lexis is onomatopoeically reinforced by such military usages as 'saps' and 'sandbags'; how 'trunks' contributes not only to the meaning but the sound, and how far the sound is the meaning; how significant is the unusual use of 'grovelled' for the attitudes of men who are after all dead, and how the word 'green' so frequently used by the Georgians, acquires a new horror. It is easy in this bombardment of harsh unpleasant sound and association not to register the vividness and contemporary appositeness of the image of trunks 'like trodden sandbags loosely filled' or to acknowledge the intuitive craftsmanship that located 'slept' between 'bulged, clotting heads' and 'plastering slime', skilfully suggesting that the beastliness that so affected the living had now no significance for the dead. And finally, as the wetness of 'sucking mud, wallowed, sodden, plastering slime' is aggravated by the renewed rain, the horror is touched by the despair of the final colloquialism.

What I am doing, of course, is trying to conduct a defence of Sassoon as a fine technician. (It is the sort of salvage work criticism has to undertake periodically, say, for Pope.) The reply to this defence is invariably that there is no unifying vision to give universal significance to his work. In Sassoon's case criticism usually attacks his poetry as a poetry of particularities, graphically described incidents, motivated by moral outrage, and lacking thus a comprehensive vision and the coherence that is the statement of a unified sensibility. In terms of his satirical poems, if one insists on considering these as a separate category, I have already conceded that Sassoon must be partial and intensely subjective. But we must

be careful not to talk of Sassoon as if all his poetry was satiric, and we must not assume that qualities he is not specifically concerned to represent are not there nevertheless by implication. Erich Maria Remarque has an interesting cautionary observation on this point:

> (My book) presents the war as seen within the small compass of the front-line soldier, pieced together out of many separate situations, out of minutes and hours, out of struggle, fear, dirt, bravery, dire necessity, death and comradeship, into one whole mosaic, from which the word Patriotism is only seemingly absent, because the simple soldier never spoke of it. His patriotism lay in the deed (not the word), it consisted simply in the fact of his presence at the front. For him that was enough. He cursed and swore at the war; but he fought on.. (1)

Is there indeed a unifying vision underwriting the 'whole mosaic' of Sassoon's poetry? The object of Sassoon's attack - the Church hierarchy in 'They', the Press in 'The Effect', 'Editorial Impressions' and 'Fight to a Finish', the civilian population in 'The Fathers', 'When I'm Among a Blaze of Lights' and 'Blighters', women in 'Glory of Women', brass hats in 'The General' and 'Base Details' (2) - seem to me significant, not because Sassoon is such an accurate index of the combatants' gripes, but because in their totality they are comprehensive. Sassoon is at war in his poetry not with the Germans but with all of that other world, civilian and military, that lies outside the perimeter of the trench war. Thus, as a soldier he is engaged with one war; as a poet he fights on quite a different front. Much of his moral outrage derived from the fact, surely, that 'friend' and 'foe' had become interchangeable terms.

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(1) Erich Maria Remarque : letter to Sir Ian Hamilton, dated June 1st, 1929, in a published correspondence on All Quiet on the Western Front. Published in Life & Letters, November issue, 1929.

(2) These poems in C.P. 1906 - 58. pp. 24, 73, 77, 74, 14, 21, 79, 75.

Within the inner circle there are the combatants - British, French, German - and among them is a new understanding based on a common knowledge of a shared way of life and of death, that bred new moral values. (One finds the same 'morality' in Barbusse's Le Feu and Remarque's All Quiet on the Western Front). Their attitudes to the coward, the S.I.W., the mentally deranged, the'blighty wound', etc. are similar, but they are not the moral attitudes commended by that other world outside. No Man's Land belonged to no contemporary nationality - but it had its distinctive population.

And what, paradoxically, gave a unity to much post-Somme poetry was just this vision of a world doubly-divided, divided one way by nationalism and duty, another way by some bitter touchstone of empricism. In Sassoon's characteristic poetry there is a blending of a desire to be understood outside of this circle, with a desire to shock, to hurt, to strike at, because he no longer accepted the idealisms cherished by the other world yet is frustrated in his attempts to inform it. Sassoon, be it remembered, was published at the time, unlike Owen or Rosenberg, who made no real contemporary impact. Like the military war, the poetic one had its casualties: 'Blighters', for example, seems to me to collapse in hysteria and frustration. (1)

This inner circle derived its physical character from the devastated landscape -

> ..the land where all
> Is ruin, and nothing blossoms but the sky
> That hastens over them where they endure
> Sad, smoking flat horizons, reeking woods,
> And foundered trench-lines volleying doom for doom. (2)

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(1) Sassoon : 'Blighters', C.P. p. 21.

(2) Sassoon : 'Prelude : The Troops'. C.P. p. 67.

This was their world - and it is with surprise, when pulled back or on leave, that they rediscover that other world, with its values intact and its attitudes unchanged. Even the posters were the same. (1) But this Waste Land gives a unity, and the ugliness of Sassoon's lexis has here its roots:

> Where men are crushed like clods, and crawl to find
> Some crater for their wretchedness; who lie
> In outcast immolation, doomed to die
> Far from clean things. (2)

The 'sad, smoking horizons' defined geographically the sense of separateness that had developed.

Although Sassoon's poetry touches on all of the moral preoccupations and is coloured by the moral attitudes of the period, it has no real ethical base. His 'morality' was really moral outrage. This, as I have tried to show, stems from two complex pressures - from the intricate officer-man guilt relationship and from his sense of a world doubly divided. Both these pressures are more complex than the simple earlier affirmations they replaced, but they are also infinitely more personal, infinitely more honest, and consequently find realisation in more compelling poetry.

Sassoon made an important contribution, too, to one of the most intriguing areas of technical interest - the attempt at narrative - with 'Counter Attack.' (3)

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(1) See, for example, Sassoon's 'Stretcher Case', C.P. p. 30.

(2) Sassoon : 'Break of Day', C.P. p. 82.

(3) Sassoon : 'Counter Attack', C.P. p. 68.

Let me be clear about one thing, I am not identifying narrative with the heroic. J.H. Johnston's thesis tends, I feel, to do just this. But twentieth-century developments in prose fiction should remind us that there are more ways of telling a story than one. And maybe, too, that the term 'story' can mean more than a chronological sequence of events objectively narrated.

For the combatant poets the situation was simple. They were, basically, lyric poets. They used narrative not so much to tell a story as to make a moral statement or explore a psychological situation. In the process, narrative and lyric tended to coalesce in a number of interesting ways. And there is, surely, precedent for this. Two of the finest Romantic narratives, 'The Ancient Mariner' and 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol', are 'lyrical ballads'. The purpose of both was to make pertinent moral observations. And it is surely not irrelevant that W.H. Auden, who was influenced by First World War Poetry, utilised the ballad for Freudian psychological 'case-histories'.

I tend to be suspicious of evaluative judgements that are based too firmly on the purely formal. As W.P. Ker cautioned:

> Form in poetry is often merely an aspect, something one takes for convenience of understanding and then lets go. The difficulty of distinguishing lyric and narrative is like the larger difficulty of distinguishing poetry and prose. (1)

And, indeed, all of his comments in the relevant section of Form and Style in Poetry (2) are pertinent.

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(1) W.P. Ker : Form and Style in Poetry, (London Lectures) London, 1928. p. 28.

(2) ibid : See 'Narrative Poetry'. pp. 280 - 290.

> There are many difficulties in the way of narrative poetry as a modern form. The great difficulty is that narrative poetry has to compete with narrative prose.(1)

Ker would reject the heroic, the epic, as anachronisms, and agree with 'the poet Everard Hall':

> Why take the style of those heroic times?
> For nature brings not back the Mastodon,
> Nor we those times. (2)

If 'a truth looks freshest in the fashion of the day' (3) surely such dramatic 'truth' as the trench war invoked, and that at a time, historically, when literary technique and convention was at one of the great cross-roads, surely such 'truth' would try to fashion for itself an adequate contemporary expression. The young trench poets did not rationalise what they were doing: but we must not confuse what they actually did as artists with what they perhaps failed to see they were doing as poets discussing their art. For their conscious concern was certainly with 'truth' rather than 'art'. If Owen's projected Preface to his poetry means anything it means just this. (4)

Ker who was not at all concerned with war poetry, nevertheless comments validly:

> Most of the great successes in <u>prose</u> narrative are won through <u>dialogue</u>, through drama, not through pure narrative. Here verse cannot compete.(5)

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(1) <u>ibid</u> : p. 280.

(2) Tennyson : 'Preface to Morte D'Arthur', <u>CP</u>. London,1954. p. 64.

(3) <u>ibid</u> : p. 63.

(4) Wilfred Owen : <u>CP</u>. p. 31.

(5) W.P. Ker : <u>Form and Style in Poetry</u>, London, 1928. p. 282.

For what Ker's general comment does here is to remind us that Sassoon's poetic instinct had taken him in a positive direction. Out of the subjective song-lyric that perhaps typifies Georgian verse, he had evolved a short, almost cryptic, dramatic lyric, using narrative devices, where dialogue played an important formal role.

Nor does Ker see the unseen impersonal narrator as being a critical reality:

> Now what is narrative without dialogue? How does it hold the audience?...through adventures, still more through the mind of the poet and his feeling..Hence it is found that some of the most successful narrative poems are those in which the temperament of the author is most strongly felt. (1)

How, one speculates, would Ker have defined 'narrative' when one of the important aspects of the 'story' was the impact of the events on the mind of the narrator?

I dealt previously with just this point in regard to Blunden's 'Third Ypres'.(2) Sassoon's 'Counter Attack' is, similarly, an attempt to give an account of a large-scale military situation. What I propose to do at this more appropriate juncture is to consider 'Counter Attack' in terms of my thesis and in contrast to Arthur Graeme West's 'The Night Patrol' and Herbert Read's ' Kneeshow Goes to War' and 'The Execution of Cornelius Vane'. By so doing I shall perhaps be better able to establish the significance of such varied narrative experimentation. For while I would accept the consensus of critical opinion that the circumstances and scale of modern warfare made objective narrative control and the detached narrator unlikely, there

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(1) ibid : p. 283.

(2) See this thesis, pp. 84 - 87.

was some narrative war poetry that merits our attention, because it is not without its affinities to changes discernible in contemporary prose narrative. I mentioned earlier, for example, the chronology of psychological stress in relation to 'Third Ypres'. And I find it surprising that modern criticism which accepts terms like 'unhero' and 'anti-hero' in relation to fiction and the drama, should fail to recognise their validity in the context of 1914 - 18 poetry.

Consideration of David Jones' In Parenthesis (1) is outwith the remit of this thesis: It is not, in its entirety, a poem, and it was composed nearly twenty years after hostilities ended. But it does support my contention in a number of ways. Here, surely, formal criteria go by the board. Here, too, poetry and prose coalesce, suggesting an integration of narrative poetry and narrative prose techniques. And here, too, we can discern illustration of a peculiar critical double-think that has hindered the realistic assessment of these poet's achievement in narrative. In Parenthesis is superb narrative, and, with its debts to Eliot, Pound and particularly Joyce, patently modernist, and the critic reads it in terms of modernist narrative techniques. All that I wish to suggest is that similar courtesy might go a long way towards a revaluation of the best narrative written from the trenches.

We are told that the soldier-poets could not disentangle themselves from their immediate situation, could not achieve that essential

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(1) David Jones : In Parenthesis, London, 1937.

objectivity which could have viewed the horror and degradation in the wider context of the fuller issues and implications of the war - "instead of a formal artistic principle of selection and control, we have an emotionalised sensibility offering glimpses, impressions, fragments" (1)

Contrast how this critical dichotomy is resolved by J.H. Johnston. First his approbation of In Parenthesis :

> ...the trivialities of experience, during the few seconds of the shell's approach, assume a clarity and fixity beyond the measure of their relevance. These trivialities assume a compelling poetic relevance, however, because they convey a psychological truth appropriate to the experience. One must note, too, that the point of view shifts from the physical sensations of Private Ball to the more objective perceptions of the narrator; it is the latter, remote and impersonal, who provides the perspective necessary for the accurate representation of the whole experience. It is the narrator and not Private Ball (he has retired to the barn) who perceives the final, incongruous but memorable detail: "The sap of vegetables slobbered the spotless breech-block of No. 3 gun." Thus, in order to recreate the full dimensions of an experience, Jones utilises the device of complex sensibility. He shifts from subjective sense-data to objective notation, selecting and blending so that every sensation, every perception, every impression achieves its full poetic effect. This technique, of course, permits the poet to free himself from the limited visualisations of the personal lyric response, for that response is incorporated within an objectified narrative progression and co-ordinated with an externalised point of view. (2)

Then how this operates in terms of Sassoon's'Counter-Attack':

> This brief narrative attempts to depict the chaotic effects of a British assault and an abortive enemy counter-attack, and indeed, the poem powerfully conveys a sensation of irredeemable horror and confusion. Considered as a narrative, however, 'Counter-Attack' is no more successful than Robert Nichols' 'The Assault'. The progression is crude and ill-adjusted,

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(1) J.H. Johnston : English Poetry of the First World War, Princeton, 1964, p. 18.

(2) ibid : p. 298.

> amounting to no more than a loose series of narrative and descriptive notations. Again, the point of view shifts from generalised narration to the consciousness of an individual soldier, and ends abruptly with the death of that soldier. Finally, the visual perspective narrows from a generalised narrative actuality to a grim and purposive description of the dead, then adjusts itself to the dazed perceptions of the soldier who unaccountably emerges in the second stanza as the protagonist. In 'Counter-Attack' confusion of form attends confusion of matter because Sassoon like Nichols, has neglected to distinguish between the haphazard continuity of actual experience and the progression demanded by the narrative mode. No communicative intent, however urgent, can justify the fallacy of the imitative form. (1)

Let us first put this in perspective. In Parenthesis is a book of just under 200 pages; 'Counter-Attack' is a poem of 39 lines. Jones writes in 1937 of the period 1915 up to the Somme; Sassoon, experiencing deep emotional crisis, writes in 1918, during his second period of convalescence, of his experiences at the Battle of Arras. But even making all due allowance here, is there not a critical double-think evident in these contrasted quotations?

I find it difficult to see how a 'brief' narrative can 'powerfully convey' an assault plus counter-attack and yet have quite so much wrong with it. I must assume that it is Johnston's loyalty to his thesis that has led to his equating 'Counter-Attack' with Nichols' 'The Assault' - which is patently, 'considered as a narrative' or anything else, inferior to Sassoon's poem. (2) And is the progresssion as 'crude, ill-adjusted or loose' as is implied?

The first of the three sections begins with a simple statement:

We'd gained our first objective hours before

Two lines follow that relate a rather rudely-awakened and over-tired dawn to the men's exhausted and unshaved condition:

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(1) ibid : pp. 97 - 8.

(2) Sassoon : 'Counter-Attack'. CP. pp. 68 - 9.

While dawn broke like a face with blinking eyes
Pallid, unshaved and thirsty, blind with smoke.

The imagery cements sections I and II together, for the second begins with -

A young soldier knelt against the bank
Staring across the morning blear with fog

- and the yawning soldier is effectively linked with a morning that has likewise been 'surprised'.

The first part of the first section indicates how, despite tiredness, the men have self-discipline, positive military virtues - "bombers posted, Lewis guns well placed, and clink of shovels deepening the shallow trench." And it is not the poet's random whim but the exercise of this last military chore that brings the soldiers close to the horrors of the recently and long dead - "the green clumsy legs and trunks face downward in the sucking mud." This stanza, in fact, develops clearly and organically. And it sums up the attack. But what the poem is about is the counter-attack, and here Sassoon shifts our attention to the young soldier, so that he can more graphically and dramatically present the two stages to follow: the expectation of the German counter-offensive, and the effect of that when it comes. This is why we shift from "generalised narration to the consciousness of the individual soldier", the 'he' who surely is a symbol of the 'we', the anonymous 'unhero', the representative sensibility, who wondered "when the Allemands would get busy," as the Germans began traversing "Sure as fate, with never a dud." With such idiomatic observations we are prepared for the counter-attack as the preliminary bombardment throws up the horrible detritus of war, "the butchered, frantic gestures of the dead."

The wider situation is enveloped in fog, as it had earlier been obscured by smoke, this symbolising the unawareness of what is happening in the fuller context of the situation. Thus the officer, "gasping and bawling", has to blunder along the trench issuing his orders, for the counter-attack is begun.

Suddenly the fog lifts and what is happening can be seen. There is a moment of panic - "Oh Christ, they're coming at us!" But discipline prevails, as we see the representative young soldier recover himself - "..rapid fire." In the "blurred confusion of yells and groans" only the narrator can register his death. Then, matter-of-factly, "the counter-attack had failed." This is not just a narrative summation, but because of its terseness and its juxtaposing with the soldier's unheeded death, it is a moral pronouncement, a judgement on the wastage of the whole ludicrous affair. This is neither imitative form nor haphazard continuity, and Johnston's generalisation is irrelevant here.

In Sassoon's view, great masses of men were moved a little forward, gaining no obvious strategic advantage, without real motivation beyond the General Staff's desire to be doing something. Thus 'Counter-Attack', like many of the short narratives of the post-Somme period, was basically a harnessing of the narrative technique, the poetic purpose of which was a moral statement.

If the ordinary soldier was the 'unhero' of post - 1916 poetry, then Arthur Graeme West can surely be described as an 'anti-hero'. The value of his Diary of A Dead Officer (1) lies in that it displays the disintegration of a vulnerable sensibility, through savage rebellion to nihilism.

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(1) A. Graeme West : Diary of A Dead Officer, London, 1919.

West's war poems are few, and he is remembered, if at all as a poet, as the man who wrote 'God! How I hate you, you cheerful young men' a savage denunciation in powerful blank verse of the heroics and religious fervour of the early poets growing posthumously popular -

> Whose pious poetry blossoms on your graves
> As soon as you are in them.....(1)

He creates his effects from a brutal juxtaposition of harsh physical realities with the noble sentiments expressed in the poetry:

> .....his head
> Smashed like an eggshell and the warm grey brain
> Spattered all bloody on the parados..
> Yet still God's in His Heaven, all is right
> In this best possible of worlds...
> God loves us, God looks down on this our strife
> And smiles in pity, blows a pipe at times,
> And calls some warriors home...(2)

Yet without doubt West's most significant and accomplished poetic statement was 'The Night Patrol'. Johnston pays tribute to it (although he does so in a footnote) and Professor Bergonzi concludes in Heroes' Twilight that

> 'The Night Patrol' deserves a prominent place in any collection of the poetry of the Great War. (3)

And a footnote is hardly this. Yet Johnston's footnote is perceptive, for he is a rewarding critic when he is not searching for the footprints of the Mastodon:

> Included among other verses in the last section of the Diary (sic), 'The Night Patrol' (dated March, 1916) is one of the most balanced and objective verse narratives written during the war.

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(1) A.G. West : 'God! How I hate you, you cheerful young men.' HUSS. pp. 142 - 3.

(2) ibid : p. 142.

(3) Bernard Bergonzi : Heroes' Twilight, London, 1965. p. 88.

> The experience of three soldiers on a patrol in No Man's Land is related with almost complete detachment; there is no departure from the course of action initiated by the author, no distortion of outline or detail, and no loss of narrative control. From the point of view of technique, at least, the poem might be seen as a page from an unwritten epic of World War I. The total effect of unity and control, as contrasted with the disorganised effects of so impressive a work as 'Third Ypres', is immediately obvious. (1)

If it is 'seen as a page from an unwritten epic', and In Parenthesis is 'as near a great epic of the war as ever the war generation will reach', (2) we must accept that the next page might be prose. But criticism should be more than this kind of dialectic exercise. Surely the most relevant critical exercises must be that which explains how it was that a young man whose prose diary is the moving account of a disintegrating sensibility, who never managed to escape from 'cloudy Paterian philosophising about death' (3) who could not 'transcend a purely personal despair and irrascibility' (4) should, of all the combatant poets, be the one who wrote what Professor Johnston finds most satisfactorily a narrative.

The answer to this unasked question is in Johnston's footnote, by implication. It was, partly at least, a simple matter of scale. 'The Night Patrol' deals with a very circumscribed military event - three men, in less than an hour, crawl about ninety yards, in the dark, to have a look at the German position.

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(1) J.H. Johnston : English Poetry of the First World War, London, 1964. pp. 146-7.

(2) Herbert Kead : 'A Malory of the Trenches,' London Mercury, XXXVI, 1937. pp. 304 - 5.

(3) B. Bergonzi : Heroes' Twilight, London, 1965. p. 86.

(4) ibid : p. 87.

The poem is, thus, not attempting to cope with anything on the scale of either 'Third Ypres' or 'Counter-Attack'. It took place at night, when many of the more horrific details were only seen momentarily as a flare lit up the scene. It is West's sense of smell principally that is assaulted, and even then one detects the strain in his control. The horror of the dead largely affects his nostrils - 'a vile sickly smell of rottenness', 'the dead men stank through all,' 'infecting earth and air,' 'we caught the scent of -' (1) and this horror is vividly realised, but his senses are not simultaneously bombarded as Sassoon's or Blunden's were.

The three soldiers are not overwhelmed by the events. They were specifically instructed, 'don't run any risks.' This to some degree explains the difference in tone. West's tone is whimsical and literary, and he is reconstructing an incident, but not attempting to reconstruct its immediacy. The rather whimsical reference to 'Elia and his Temple Church' in relation to 'the Crusader' instances this. And it is whimsy and meiosis that keep the nausea under strict control when the patrol encounters

> a bunch of half a dozen men
> All blown to bits, an archipelago
> Of corrupt fragments, vexing to us three,
> Who had no light to see by, save the flares. (2)

The impact of the 'corrupt fragments' of corpses is cushioned by the literary whimsy of 'archipelago', and the understatement of 'vexing to us three' reinforces the control.

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(1) A.G. West : 'The Night Patrol ', HUSS. pp. 144 - 5.

(2) ibid : p. 145.

But this is because West's poetic purpose is different. Sassoon and Blunden were both motivated by a moral purpose. 'The Night Patrol' has no overt curative intent. It may well be, as Bergonzi says, that it 'conveys an anti-heroic attitude all the more effectively for being implicit,' (1) but it was written neither to make moral statement nor to present psycholigical stress. Johnston, in his footnote, goes so far as to claim that

> (West) seems to have produced 'The Night Patrol' merely as an experimental adjunct to his prose notations. (2)

For an 'experimental adjunct' it shows an accomplished handling of free verse. In assessing its significance, we must bear in mind not only the scale of the incident narrated but the fact that it ante-dates the Somme.(3)

The narrative attempts of Sassoon and Blunden were post-Somme, and they were shaped by an urgent curative purpose. Their primary aim was not to record a chronology of events. And as well as the moral commitment, these poems were making implicity the aesthetic judgement that in the circumstances of trench warfare the psychological stress vitiates all conceptual notions of the objective narrator. It may be, as in Blunden's case, that he relates the narrator's personal involvement and disintegration; or, as in 'Counter-Attack', that the narrator cannot be the omniscient figure objectively embracing the totality, but true to 'stream of consciousness' techniques, will be diverted from the main 'narrative' to perceive and record and apparently inconsequential phenomenon, like the unheeded death of one poor soldier.

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(1) B. Bergonzi: Heroes' Twilight, London, 1965. p. 87.

(2) J.H. Johnston : English Poetry of the First World War, London, 1964. p. 147.

(3) March, 1916.

There are both moral and psychological inferences to be drawn from such 'distraction' from the narrative continuity.

West's moral statement was implicit, and, in a sense, the control which operates through whimsy and literary allusion dilutes the efficiacy of the moral pronouncement. It would be wrong to be misled into an assertion that poetry should operate by implication. With the curative purpose of Sassoon, statement, clear unambiguous statement, ensures that clarity which is the prerequisite of immediacy. But any attempt to valuate poetry on the basis of ordained formal concepts is frustrated surely by Herbert Read's 'The Execution of Cornelius Vane' and 'Kneeshaw Goes to War'. (1) In a sense these are psychological 'case-histories' rather than narratives, and Read has fashioned for his immediate poetic purpose a synthesis that is both novel and effective. For the purpose of character revelation, he has blended imagist techniques, free verse, biblical narrative, a straight almost bare narration. In 'Kneeshaw Goes to War' we find, as well, two short lyrics, technically imagistic, inset within a narrative framework. The first lyric is Kneeshaw's vision of hope, of a personal salvation, his -

musings
Whilst he yet dwelt in the romantic fringes. (2) -

while the second lyric is at the end when, 'minus a leg, on crutches, he sang his 'war-song'. These lyrics integrate satisfactorily into the narrative because they are the 'dreams' that come not inaptly into psychological studies.

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(1) Herbert Read : C.P. London, 1966. pp. 40 - 44, 29 - 33.

(2) ibid : p. 30.

But these two poems have a moral purpose, even though, in a sense, it is the negative one of involving a suspension of facile moral judgements. It is, in fact, the imagist one, both technically and morally, of rejecting conventional and convenient 'labels' like 'S.I.W.,' 'coward', 'deserter'. Cornelius Vane, for example, was a 'Self-Inflicted Wound':

> I Cornelius Vane,
> A fly in the sticky web of life,
> Shot away my right index finger. (1)

It was, he tells us, an act that cost him 'a bloody sweat.' Consequently

> They made me a company cook!
> I peel potatoes and other men fight. (2)

Then a year later, the enemy broke through, and everyone was required for active service:

> Then the enemy broke our line
> And their hosts spread over the plains
> Like unleash'd beads,
> Every man was taken -
> Shoemakers, storemen, grooms -
> And arms were given them
> That they might stem the oncoming host. (3)

Both syntax and lexis - 'hosts,' 'plains,' 'stem the oncoming host,' 'every man was taken ' - suggest scriptural prose, and the simile 'like unleash'd beads' gains, indeed, from its unexpected location here.

When Cornelius protested that he could not shoot,"'But you can stab,' the sergeant said," and Cornelius was marched up to the front. He grew more and more apprehensive as he encountered the wounded returning, and when a shell exploded beside him when ' he went aside to piss' fear engulfed him. He ran, like Falstaff, through 'instinct':

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(1) ibid : p. 40.

(2) ibid : p. 41.

(3) ibid : p. 42.

He willed nothing, saw nothing, only before him
Were the free open fields:
To the fields he ran. (1)

By nightfall he had reached a wood, slept a few hours, and was awakened by the cold of dawn:

So Cornelius ran about in that white night
The sun's wan glare his only guide. (2)

Then, with a few superb imaginative touches Read invests the rather bald narrative with power:

Coming to a canal
He ran up and down like a dog
Deliberating where to cross:
One way he saw a bridge
Loom vaguely, but approaching
He heard voices and turned about.
He went for the other way,
But growing tired before he found a crossing,
Plunged into the icy water and swam.
The water gripped with agony;
His clothes sucked the heavy water,
And as he ran again
Water oozed and squelched from his boots,
His coat dripped and his teeth chattered. (3)

'Like a dog' is important here, and seems to have a significance in this context beyond anything its economic simplicity might promise. This short simile reduces Cornelius' behaviour to a kind of instinctive animal panic, so that this minor incident is a microcosm of his behaviour in the general context of the poem. Again, an image like 'the water gripped with agony' is not only vividly descriptive but marks Cornelius down as one to whom things <u>happen</u>.

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(1) <u>ibid</u> : p. 42.

(2) <u>ibid</u> : p. 43.

(3) <u>ibid</u> : p. 43.

He reaches a farm, finds some food, mufti,

And as he went -
Always going west - (1)

Read reminds us not only of his direction as he luxuriates in the beauty of the countryside but his ultimate fate which he is now approaching blindly.

The peace of the fields
Dissipated the terror that had been the strength of his will (2)

and he entered a village, was arrested, tried for desertion, was 'mute in his own defence', and was condemned to be shot.

The morning was bright, and as they tied
The cloth over his eyes, he said to the assembly:
'What wrong have I done that I should leave these:
The bright sun rising
And the birds that sing?' (3)

The account of Cornelius Vane's cowardice and desertion is given fairly objectively. But his final words as he faces a firing squad surely raise a moral issue: In what sense is a man morally guilty when he does not understand wherein he has been at fault. This final question, when taken with the poem's epigraph from Rimband, surely demands that we suspend moral judgement of the facile label-sticking kind, and strive for understanding. Read's position, of course, is itself the expression of a moral judgement.

'Kneeshaw Goes to War' is an account of a casualty not only of the war but of life in general. Ernest Kneeshaw is a Prufrock in Khaki, and although without his illustrious contemporary's social and sexual fantasy, has played a similar passive role.

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(1) ibid : p. 43.

(2) ibid : p. 44.

(3) ibid : p. 44.

Life was a far perspective
Of high black columns
Flanking, arching and encircling him,
He never, even vaguely, tried to pierce
The gloom about him,
But was content to contemplate
His finger-nails and wrinkled boots. (1)

Even the sex-drive failed to motivate him towards purposeful action:

Abashed by the will-less promptings of his flesh
He continued to contemplate his feet. (2)

Here, one can trace quite clearly Read's affinity with Pound and Eliot.

Kneeshaw was conscripted into the army, his drooping back was straightened, and he seemed to approximate more to the human norm both physically and mentally; he became more adept at 'reflecting' and, to some extent, 'divested of ancestral gloom'. Then he was sent to France. At Boulogne, he had a vision of personal possibility. Working from the image of the arrayed masts of the ships from all parts of the world, Kneeshaw imagined that the 'dark columns' of 'that dark forest of his youth' might similarly be 'disintegrated into light and colour and the fragrance of winds.'

These were Kneeshaw's musings
Whilst he yet dwelt in the romantic fringes. (3)

But he is pushed into action, away from the 'romantic fringes' of the war, and

For a while chance was kind
Save for an inevitable
Searing of the mind. (4)

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(1) Read : 'Kneeshaw Goes to War', CP. p. 29.

(2) ibid : p. 30.

(3) ibid : p. 31.

(4) ibid : p. 31.

Later, his war 'became intense' and he supped full of horrors. He was caught up in the 'ghastly desolation' and the feeling of being overwhelmed by the war as he had been by life, 'a cog in some great evil machine'. At Polygonbeke, he saw a comrade, drowning in mud, being shot by his own officer:

> not a neat job - the revolver
> was too close. (1)

The language here is brutally laconic, and conditions us for Kneeshaw's ultimate horror. Ordered to 'dig in', he swings his pick and tugs as it is caught in the earth. What he pulls up is a cleft skull.

> For a second or two he was impotent
> Vainly trying to recover his will, but his senses prevailing. (2)

But this conflict between instinct/senses and will is resolved for him. Unlike Cornelius Vane, his terror is given no time to overwhelm him. A shell explodes and he is hurled into 'the beautiful peace of coma". He loses a leg and is invalided out. Back in England, he sings his 'war-song'. He is haunted by fear, by loneliness. He is conscious of his failure to use life meaningfully. Like Prufrock, he had measured out his life with his own particular 'coffee-spoons'. Even Judas, he realises, 'in a mental sort of way' had been motivated by a rational purpose. What the war has revealed to Kneeshaw are the moral implications of his own passivity, for unlike Cornelius Vane, he is his own judge, his own firing-squad. He has lived on a purely instinctive level but he now realises that human activity which cannot be judged dogmatically must nevertheless be shaped by some moral law:

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(1) ibid : p. 32.

(2) ibid : p. 32.

I stand on this hill and accept
The flowers at my feet and the deep
Beauty of the still tarn:
Chance that gave me a crutch and a view
Gave me these.

The soul is not a dogmatic affair
Like manliness, colour, and light;
But these essentials there be;
To speak truth and so rule oneself
That other folk may rede. (1)

Technically, the synthesis that Read effected in these poems, successfull reconciles the two polarities evident in his shorter poems, the crude and brutal directness of 'The Happy Warrior' at one extreme and the imagistic 'Fear' at the other. The former is a bloody bludgeon, the latter, technically more subtle and sophisticated, seems perhaps too remote and austere for the moral anguish that the war occasioned. What Read did was simply to utilise the narrative form, in which he achieved an objective detachment that sounded casual and laconic, to relate the experience of war to two human casualties who were already defined before they were committed to the war: That Read later acknowledged his achievement is evident in The Innocent Eye:

I think I may say that by the end of the
war I had discovered myself and my style -
that is to say, I had made an equation between
emotion and image, between feeling and expression.
So long as I was true to this equation, I need not
be afraid of influences or acquired mannerisms. (2)

Thematically, Read's most pertinent statements in his war poetry are on fear and those who were afraid. It is interesting to note that when Bergonzi summarises Read's achievement, it is in relation to 'the overthrow of Hotspur by Falstaff' and Bergonzi deals with fear and its war-time implications in Read's poetry in psychological terms:-

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(1) ibid : p. 33.

(2) Herbert Read : The Innocent Eye, London, p. 105.

> conventionally a crime but which is often
> purely biological, the revolt of the organism
> against the directness of the ethical
> intelligence. (1)

Read was not concerned to glorify Falstaff - he did try to rationalise the Falstaffian viewpoint.

The moral statement of Read's 'My Company' (2) is perhaps the attitude most in accord with the attitudes of his fellow-combatants. In this poem he shares in that elevation of comradeship into the one real positive in a world of despair and negation, the moral ideal of a 'greater love'. Read's lexis makes it clear that for him his company, 'a body and a soul, entire', gradually 'absorbed' him in spite of cultural, intellectual and sophisticated misgivings, and the experience was a religious one:

> In many acts and quiet observances
> You absorbed me:
> Until one day I stood eminent
> And I saw you gathered round me,
> Uplooking,
> And about you a radiance that seemed to beat
> With variant glow and to give
> Grace to our unity. (3)

It is typical of the officer-poet's dilemma that sometimes in the poem it is his men who are the 'modern Christs', who are crucified on the wire, and sometimes it is the poet, who will 'stand in the loneliest wilderness', who will 'bow his head and share their doom' who seems the Christ figure. (4) This particular ambivalence is again typical of the 1916 - 18 period.

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(1) Bernard Bergonzi : Heroes' Twilight, London, 1965. p. 74.

(2) Herbert Read : 'My Company' ULD. pp. 87 - 90.

(3) ibid : p. 87.

(4) ibid : pp. 88 and 90.

Although the ideal of 'greater love' found its noblest and most philosophic statement in Owen's work, most of the poets found to a lesser or greater degree that this compassion defined their ethical position in 1917 and 1918. Nichols, as we have seen, had earlier anticipated this attitude in a somewhat superficial and rhetorical way. Like Owen, he was concerned to make clear the distinction between a secular, physically-based love and the deeper spiritual love that, in Graves' phrase, 'blossomed from mud.'

"O loved, living, dying, heroic soldier
All, all my joy, my grief, my love are thine!" (1)

Though here this juxtaposing of 'living, dying' and 'joy, grief' are patently facile, too little felt along the blood to carry any real conviction, as the war trudged and squelched its way from the Somme to Vimy Ridge the sentiment grew from an emotional outburst to a poetically realised moral position.

Graves, in 'Two Fusiliers' (2) also anticipates Owen. Although his moral base was radically different to Owen's , and this particular moral position never was for him a poetic raison d'etre, Graves poem comes close in its imagery to 'Apologia pro Poemate Mea'. Graves' two fusiliers by "wire and wood and stake are bound" just as Owen's comrades are "wound with war's hard wire."

"Show me the two so closely bound
As we, by the wet bond of blood,
By friendship, blossoming from mud,
By Death." (3)

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(1) Robert Nichols : 'Fulfilment', MIA p. 258.

(2) Robert Graves : 'Two Fusiliers', ULD p. 148.

(3) Wilfred Owen : 'Apologia Pro Poemate Mea'. CP. p. 39.

The difference is that Graves was celebrating a particular and personal relationship: Owen embraced a generation. Sassoon gave it clear but limited expression in 'The Dream' and 'I Stood with the Dead'. (1) During his convalescence at Craiglockart and Scarborough, it haunts him and is in constant conflict with the pressures of his pacificism. In 'Sick Leave', for example, his continued absence from the Front is challenged by 'the noiseless dead':

> "...while the dawn begins with slashing rain
> I think of the Battalion in the mud.
> 'When are you going out to them again?
> Are they not still your brothers through our blood?" (2)

But 'Banishment' is perhaps Sassoon's clearest statement of his position. He is 'banished' from the 'patient men who fight'. He defines those qualities that rouse his love - their patience, his pity and pride in their experience, the sense of companionship, of agonies shared 'shoulder to aching shoulder'. In Sassoon's eyes, these are positive virtues -

> "ever in my sight
> They went arrayed in honour"

- but their end was inevitable:

> ".. But they died,-
> Not one by one: and mutinous I cried
> To those who sent them out into the night." (3)

And just as "Love drove me to rebel" so now "Love drives me back to grope with them in Hell." The vision of wholesale death conjured so simply yet vividly - 'not one by one' is reinforced by 'grope', suggesting that lack of direction, that blind-seeking concomitant with modern warfare on the grand scale.

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(1) Sassoon : C.P. pp. 93 and 103.

(2) ibid : 'Sick Leave'. C.P. p. 85.

(3) ibid : 'Banishment'. C.P. p. 86.

And finally, in the poem, Sassoon's pacifist resolution is subordinated to his desire to return, since only there could he register a moral protest that would be politically acceptable.

Owen's text was St. John, Chapter 15: "This is my commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved you. Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." This injunction, significantly, was given by Christ to his disciples at the Last Supper, when he knew his death was certain. In 'Greater Love'(1) Owen not only contrasts physical love with the deeper spiritual love that had its roots in a sense of mutual dependence and sacrifice, but also compares this love and sacrifice with that of Christ. The crucifixion image is used with greater subtlety and integrated more significantly than before, and not only are the love of Christ for man and the love of man for man equated, but they are greater than the love of man for woman or of God for man. With consummate poetic skill Owen translates Christ's love, the new spiritual love, born of the comradeship of the soldier, and conventional physical love, all in the terms of sexual imagery. The red lips of love, the "kindness of wooed and wooer" seems inferior to the 'love pure' of the English dead.

"O Love, your eyes lose lure
When I behold eyes blinded in my stead!" (2)

suggests not only that the eyes of woman have not the same power to transmit attraction as the 'blinded' eyes of the wounded or dead, but invokes also Cupid, 'that blind boy'.

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(1) Owen : 'Greater Love'. CP. p. 41.

(2) ibid.

In the second stanza,

"Your slender attitude
Trembles not exquisite like limbs knife-skewed,
Rolling and rolling there
Where God seems not to care" (1)

Owen combines the obvious contrast of sexual intercourse ('trembles', 'limbs knife-skewed', 'rolling and rolling there') with the sprawling limbs of the dying soldier, with a patent suggestion of the crucifixion i.e. not only "That ye love one another" but also "as I have loved you". The line, 'Where God seems not to care', reinforces this, comparing God's indifference with Christ's love, inferring that man's capacity to love men is greater than God's, and relating the sacrificial death of the soldier, as his limbs are cramped 'in death's extreme decrepitude', to the crucifixion of Christ who also felt Himself forsaken.

In the third stanza, the voice of Love 'dear, gentle and evening clear' sings not so soft

"As theirs whom none now hear,
Now earth has stopped their piteous mouths
that coughed."

The artistic placing of the simple 'that coughed' at the end of this stanza somehow takes us from the stopped mouths, back to the first stanza, as the dying man coughs his blood into silence, and his 'red lips' kiss the stained stones.

Finally, Owen contrasts the heart, the conventional seat of the affections, which was never 'hot nor large nor full like hearts made great with shot.'

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(1) ibid.

"And though your hand be pale,
Paler are all which trail
Your cross through flame and hail:
Weep, you may weep, for you may touch them not."

The pale hand of Love (woman) is not so pale (beautiful, but also, of course, white in death) as those hands that 'trail' Christ's cross through the hell of war. The emotive value of 'trail' emphasises the tiredness, the weariness of the soldier. And the concluding line evokes Christ's rebuke to the women of Jerusalem carrying with it a cataclysmic vision of the future of the world.

Man's divinity is adumbrated in the opening lines of "Apologia Pro Poemate Meo." (1)

"I, too, saw God through mud -
The mud that cracked on cheeks when wretches smiled."

Owen catches the sense of that abandon, that exultation, that had its roots in despair, the laughter that was a defiant and existential rejection of values other than human.

"Merry it was to laugh there -
Where death becomes absurd and life absurder."

Only Hardy could have escaped unscathed from this use of 'absurder', and there is something of Hardy's humanism in this despair. The exultation was 'power'.

'Not to feel sickness or remorse of murder.'

But this 'power' has a price, and that price, which Owen evaluated at length in 'Insensibility,' (2) is the rejection and death of essential humanity.

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(1) Owen : CP. p. 39.

(2) ibid : p. 37.

"I, too, have dropped off fear -
Behind the barrage, dead as my platoon."

He has seen and shared in this exultation when

"faces that used to curse me, scowl for scowl
Shine and lift up with passion of oblation,
Seraphic for an hour..."

But when the exultation passes the faces that were 'seraphic' are seen to be emptied now of their humanity - 'they were foul.'

As in 'Greater Love' he contrasts the two concepts of love; the new 'fellowship'

"wound with war's hard wire whose stakes
are strong;
Bound with the bandage of the arm that
drips;
Knit in the webbing of the rifle-thong" (1)

is the true love, born of pain and agony with suggestions of the crown of thorns and ritual blood-brotherhood. The other love is born of Joy, "whose ribbon slips," and the full contrast is contained within the imagery of 'wire' and 'ribbon'.

The next stanza defines the new beauty he has perceived in a sequence of paradoxes - 'beauty in hoarse oaths' 'music in the silentness of duty' and 'peace where shell-storms spouted reddest spate.' And in the concluding eight lines he rejects the notion that anyone can come vicariously, to an appreciation of their conditions, their humour, their courage through art or anything else.

"You shall not come to think them well content
By any jest of mine. These men are worth
Your tears. You are not worth their merriment."

In these concluding lines Owen seems to reject a purely experiential poetry. The chasm between the outside world and the tragic predicament of the sacrificed armies can no longer be bridged by satire - 'You are not worth their merriment.'

(1) Owen : 'Apologia Pro Poemate Mea,' CP. p. 39.

Owen's dilemma, as a man, led him ultimately to re-define his moral position. Fundamentally a religious man, convinced that the failure of established religion to make any kind of meaningful Christian statement on the war spelt out the death of Christianity and deprived, by the awful actualities of the conditions, of Christian hope, Owen clung tenaciously to an experienced love that he felt was fundamentally the true Christian love - the greater love. His inability to define his position other than in terms of the Christian myth is the strength of his poetic position and an index of the depth of his earlier religious conviction. As an artist, he had long since abandoned Romantic and Georgian concepts of the poet's function, moving from introspection and rhetoric, to social purpose and hard colloquialism, rejecting poetry with a capital 'P' and turning towards lines to which no soldier could say 'Non compris.'

Earlier poets, like Hodgson, had been concerned that the poet should prove himself as a soldier rather than as an artist:

"Make me a soldier,Lord" (1)

There was a half-articulated notion that just as tennis-players or grocers or students relinquished their games, trades and studies for the duration, so the poet should go into suspended animation and be a soldier. One finds this in Ivor Gurney's "To the Poet Before Battle":

"Remember thy great craft's honour, that they may say
Nothing in shame of poets. Then the crumbs
Of praise the little versemen joyed to take
Shall be forgotten; then they must know we are,
For all our skill in words, equal in might
And strong of mettle as those we honoured. Make
The name of poet terrible in just war,
And like a crown of honour upon the fight." (2)

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(1) W.N. Hodgson : 'Before Action', ULD. p. 29.

(2) Ivor Gurney : 'To the Poet Before Battle,' MIA. p. 30.

Such apologetics are, of course, directly attributable to the failure of the poet to find his role and identity now that he was also a combatant. Unlike Tennyson, the poets were in the Light Brigade. They felt that they were incapable of that objectivity that saw the war steadfastly and saw it whole. There was emotion but no tranquillity in which to recollect it.

The first real function that the poet discerned for himself was that of the propagandist. Until he knew and felt his sensibility modified by the actualities of the war, he was content simply to speculate about war from a strongly personal base; he simply Georgianised war, some poets, like Rosenberg, felt that the experience was now, that the poetry would have to come later:

> I will not leave a corner of my consciousness
> covered up, but saturate myself with the strange
> and extraordinary new conditions of this life, and
> it will all refine itself into poetry later on. (1)

It rarely did, either because there was no 'later on' or somehow it came out as prose.

But Rosenberg's attitude adumbrated here differed from the Sassoon-Owen position, partly at least because they were officers and he was not. Being officers in the line, their moral base evolved differently, because they felt that compassion-guilt-victim- betrayer relationship only possible in terms of officer to men. Hence the overriding compulsion to see the poet's function as interpreter of and advocate of his men -

> that had no skill
> To speak of their distress - (2)

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(1) Isaac Rosenberg : Works ed. Bottomley & Harding. 1937. p. 373.

(2) Owen : 'The Calls,' CP. p. 80.

was never Rosenberg's fundamental position. Nevertheless, it was this concept of the poet's duty that produced the most characteristic war poetry of the later years of the war.

Rosenberg furthermore, was Jewish, and he entered the war with a base that was culturally different. He had, particularly with a background in the East End of London, no roots in that pastoral tradition that was the inheritance of his contemporaries. Rosenberg was not made into a poet by the war in the way that Sassoon was, and the progression of his poetry during the 1914-15 period little accords with the typical pattern of evolution. It was not simply that he entered the war late, nor that he differed from his contemporaries both socialllly and culturally. Rosernberg differed principally in terms of technique, for he was an experimenter, a 'modernist.' I use the term 'modernist' reluctantly, for want of a better, and I imply by it what I feel Rosenberg would have understood by it i.e. one who was interested by current experimental techniques and modes, imagism, free verse, the symbolists. In effect, it meant one who tried to transmit his meaning through images and symbolic images rather than discursively. But the war nevertheless had a powerful effect on his poetry, and I think that Bergonzi has defined this impact very simply in his short appraisal of Rosenberg's real achievement. For Bergonzi has avoided the temptation to extravagant redress for prior critical neglect. He writes:

> I would be inclined to say that a great deal - perhaps most - of Rosenberg's earlier work is marred by a quality that could be called groping as much as exploration. A lot of this work seems to me incoherent and often desperately obscure. (1)

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(1) B. Bergonzi : Heroes' Twilight, p. 111.

He then defines the effect of the war:

> The impact of the war had an immediate sharpening effect on Rosenberg's poetry. (1)

Bergonzi rightly, I think, perceives an element of aestheticism in Rosenberg, and quotes explicitly a pre-war essay and implicitly his poetic practice (2) to instance this. What this signifies is that Rosernberg was concerned more with how he was saying rather than what, with the artistic process more than content. The 'sharpening effect' is no more than the effect of a more equitable harmony between technique and content. That Rosenberg had the technical skill, that he had in particular an image-making faculty of superb imaginative perception, the sensibility, the creative force to become a fine poet cannot be doubted: That he had found his true poetic voice is less certain.

An analysis of the twenty-three poems (3) occasioned by the war reveals a poet who was basically an imagist. Some of his imagistic poems are technically fine, but static and seemingly remote. (We commented earlier on the same response to the imagist poems of Read). 'The Troop Ship' (4) is a good example of this. It has a visual power that derives perhaps from the fact that Rosenberg was a painter, and a control that stems from what is, fundamentally, the imagist mode.

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(1) ibid : p. 111.

(2) ibid : p. 113.

(3) There are 20 poems in 'Trench Poems, 1916-18', CP. pp. 70 - 91, 'The Dead Heroes' in 'Youth, 1915' CP. p. 42, 'Marching' in 'Moses, 1916' CP. p. 66, and 'On Receiving News of the War' in 'Earlier Poems Unpublished', CP. p. 124.

(4) Rosenberg : 'The Troop Ship', CP. p. 70.

But as a war poem it seems peripheral (1) Rosenberg addressed himself to capturing immediate experience which would 'refine itself into poetry later.' This aim which parallelled his natural strengths and weaknesses as a poet produced some of the finest images of the war, some fine short 'Imagiste' poems, but did nothing for his rather suspect sense of form. But some of the most memorable lines and images on the war are the product of his rich imagination.

> Iron are our lives
> Molten right through our youth,
> A burnt space through ripe fields
> A fair mouth's broken tooth. (2)

The images in 'A Worm Fed on the Heart of Corinth' (3) are typically Imagistic, and in his earliest 'war' poem written in Cape Town in 1914 he can create a superb image that universalises the impact of the war:

> Snow is a strange white word,
> No ice or frost
> Has asked of bud or bird
> For Winter's cost. (4)

Interesting technically is a short ode occasioned by the sinking of the Lusitania, interesting both thematically and technically:

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(1) Rosenberg was on friendly terms with Ezra Pound. See Works. (ed. Bottomley and Harding, London, 1937. p. 326) for a letter dated 1912 expressing Rosenberg's interest in F.S. Flint. Jospeh Cohen, "Isaac Rosenberg: From Romantic to Classic," Tulane Studies in English, X, (1960)1929 - 142, for a study of T.E. Hulme's influence on Rosenberg.

(2) Rosenberg : 'August, 1914', CP. p. 70.

(3) ibid : p. 74.

(4) ibid : 'On Receiving News of the War', p. 124.

Chaos! that coincides with this militant purpose.
Chaos! the heart of this earnest malignancy.
Chaos! that helps, chaos that gives to shatter
Mind-wrought, mind-unimagining energies
For topless ill, of dynamite and iron-
Soulless logic, inventive enginery.
Now you have got the peace-faring 'Lusitania,'
Germany's gift - all earth they would give Thee,
Chaos. (1)

The use of free verse suggests one who has been in recent contact with his Whitman, but the use of 'Chaos', 'the heart of this earnest malignancy,''inventive enginery' has a Hardyesque ring. It is difficult,too, to resist the conclusion that 'topless ill' means not only evil without limit but 'the topless towers of Ilium.'

Thematically, the poem is significant: Rosenberg is one of the few poets to commemorate the new technological war and the scientific mind that had unleashed so much 'dynamite and iron' on the world. Earlier he had made the same point. There was a new Mars, a 'subtler brain' who

beats iron
To shoe the hoops of death
(Who paws dynamic air now).
Blind fingers loose an iron cloud
To rain immortal darkness
On strong eyes. (2)

Perhaps also he saw the sinking of the Lusitania and the consequent entry of the United States into the war as, quite literally, the world extension of chaos. As a poem it is not an unqualified success; There is a syntactic chaos at the heart of the poem. It does suggest a poetic power, but it seems rather impersonal and remote, perhaps, from the event itself.

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(1) Rosenberg : 'Lusitania', CP. p. 71.

(2) Rosenberg : 'Marching', CP. p. 66.

Rosenberg attempted also poems that are less specifically or not at all imagistic. 'From France' and 'Home Thoughts from France' (1) sound almost conventionally Georgian, and are insignificant. 'The Dying Soldier' (2) may owe something to Housman but Rosenberg offers a discursive naivete for the austere restraint of the older poet. Rosenberg's poetic imagination, indeed, by the evidence of these shorter poems, moved by images, though he is by no means a dogmatic Imagist, like Read or Aldington. He was both too instinctively an experimenter and too good a poet to be limited by the formal restraints of purely Imagist theory.

Another simple index of the experimental nature of Rosenberg's war poetry is seen in his willingness to use the same phrase in more than one poem. 'Strong eyes', for example, occurs both in 'Marching' and 'Break of Day in the Trenches' (3). We find references to Circe's swine, Titan, 'the brain's ways', 'pallid days' etc. in both 'Soldier Twentieth Century' and 'Girl to Soldier on Leave' (4), which read as experimental drafts based on the same experiential data. The general impression created by the 'Trench Poems' is of a poet with a moral commitment, but, much more so, an aesthetic concern for the creative artistic process.

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(1) Rosenberg : CP. pp. 72, 74.

(2) ibid : CP. p. 75.

(3) Rosenberg : CP. pp. 66 and 73.

(4) ibid : CP. pp. 87 and 88.

The richness of his poetic background is widened by the variety of synthesis indicated by another group of poems - 'In War', 'The Immortals' and 'Returning, We Hear the Larks'. (1) The uneven quality of these poems is attributable only partly to the physical conditions under which they were composed. That each synthesis is a technical mélange is an aspect, too, of their inconsistency of texture. Of 'In War' Professor Johnston writes:

> 'In War' is a short narrative that is marred, unfortunately, by a rather melodramatic conclusion. The poem is notable, however, for its creation of a haunting impression of timelessness: life, death, burial, pain, and weariness are depicted with the same simplicity, the same dignity, and the same concern with essentials that attend the epic narrative. (2)

But it is not an epic poet, but an imagist trying to universalise the poet's recognition of the brotherhood of man and the world's tardy recognition of it that produces, in fact, the 'rather melodramatic conclusion'. In the early stanzas of the poem Rosenberg's lyrical gift and image-making faculty tend to dominate lexis and syntax. We note in successive stanzas the rather sensuous lexis and imagery of his pre-War aestheticism and the vivid terseness of Pound's imagism.

> In the old days when death
> Stalked the world
> For the flower of men,
> And the rose of beauty faded
> And pined in the great gloom,
>
> One day we dug a grave:
> We were vexed,
> With the Sun's heat.
> We scanned the hooded;
> At noon we sat and talked.

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(1) ibid : CP. pp. 76 - 7, 78 and 80.

(2) J.H. Johnston : English Poetry of the First World War, London, 1964. p. 227.

There is a Pre-Raphaelite etiolation in the former stanza absent from the latter, which is superbly economic. But his attempt to translate the experience into a moral statement founders on the rocks of a melodramatic rhetoric:

> The good priest read: I heard.....
> Dimly my brain
> Held words and lost....
> Suddenly, my blood ran cold....
> God! God! it could not be
>
> He read my brother's name;
> I sank--------
> I clutched the priest.
> They did not tell me it was he
> Was killed three days ago.

The reliance on punctuation perhaps points to the basic weakness of these stanzas. The conclusion, however, has a lyric grandeur that lifts the poem from such histrionics:

> What are the great sceptred dooms
> To us, caught
> In the wild wave?
> We break ourselves on them,
> My brother, our hearts and years.

There is a sweep here that is both Hebraic and Cosmic.

In 'The Immortals' (1) Rosenberg replaces the five-lined unrhymed stanza, with a four-lined rhymed verse. The first ten lines are characterised by a magnificent mastery of syntax. There is scriptural poetic language,

> Yea, all the day and all the night
> For them I could not rest nor sleep
> Nor guard from them and hide in flight,

working to a climax that is an ecstasy of killing:

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(1) ibid : CP. p. 78.

I killed and killed with slaughter mad
I killed till all my strength was gone.
And still they came to torture me -

But Rosenberg's attempts to 'deflate' the poem to relate the grandeur of this slaughter to the lice that cause it results only in a kind of lexical bathos in the concluding stanza.

'Returning, We Hear the Larks' (1) is free verse, and Rosenberg makes good technical use of the syntactic subtlety that is the sine qua non of accomplished free verse. This poem, indeed, has a clarity that derives from Rosenberg's repetition of 'we know' and 'we only know', 'death could drop' but 'song only dropped', accentuating by so doing his basic theme that beauty and the joyous response to it may be the delusion, and that death might be the reality. Death 'could drop from the dark as easily as song' but, this time, 'song only dropped'; we know that 'sinister threat lurks there' but, 'wearied as we are,' we only know that the camp represents 'a little safe sleep.'

It is, of course, impossible to read this poem without recall of Shelley's 'To a Skylark' - there is a similar ecstatic and mystical experience, the same imagery of showering music, and a similar sequence of images to define his experience. No doubt this was deliberate, for whereas Shelley's similes sought to define an ideal beauty, Rosenberg evokes an omnipresent sinister menace. The contrast thus enforced reinforces Rosenberg's basic theme centred round death-beauty and dream-reality. And the concluding sequence of similes suggests that the reality is death. The 'dreams' are of a 'blind man', 'on sand' and 'by dangerous tides'; the girl 'dreams no ruin lies there', and, by implication, the poet believes it does;

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(1) ibid : CP. p. 80.

her kisses 'where a serpent hides' offer joy built upon a destructive force. Lady Macbeth, when she advocated that her husband should look like the flower but 'be the serpent under it' was instancing the paradox between beauty and goodness on the one hand and the inner evil on the other that gives shape to the play. Rosenberg however attributed to war the power to make beauty precarious and death the ultimate reality. But, in the ecstatic third stanza, he instances the human ability to respond still to such beauty, even when it is writ on sand 'by dangerous tides.'

'Louse Hunting' (1) is superbly visualised. Of all of his poems this reminds that Rosenberg intended to be a painter. Evidence of this is the reference to 'nudes' 'silhouettes', the insistent 'See' 'See' that structures the free verse in the second part of the poem. There is an almost Hogarthian quality, as the 'merry limbs in hot Highland fling' cast their grotesque shadows on the wall. Round the graphic word 'smutch' the 'gargantuan' fingers and 'supreme flesh' of man are balanced by the 'supreme littleness' of the 'wizard vermin'. Any evaluation of a poet's success must be rooted in an analysis of the best he wrote. As a war-poet, 'Break of Day in the Trenches' and ' Dead Man's Dump' must be the measure of Rosenberg's achievement. Although very different in tone and intent, they have in common a speculative imagination that strives to reach beyond the presentation of crude and horrific actuality to the strange mystery of life and death and which, therefore, invested the realities of war experience with symbolic significance.

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(1) ibid : CP. p. 79.

'Break of Day in the Trenches' (1) is distinguished by the quality of Rosenberg's poetic insight, which shapes the rich imagery and fashions universal symbols out of what were the commonest emblems of 1914 - 18 trench poetry - the rat and the poppy. The theme is the universal one of life and death in the contemporary terms of sacrifice and survival. The opening lines are, in my view, the most magnificent evocation of a quiet fatalism and resignation to be produced by the war:

> The darkness crumbles away -
> It is the same old druid time as ever.

'Crumbles' suggests not only the literal crumbled horizon that is the poet's view from the parapet, but that the earth of the parapet is still constantly falling, earth to earth, and has thus larger connotations of decay. It is dawn , the time-honoured druidical hour of sacrifice, and this war sacrifice seems to the poet to have a ritualistic quality. The location of 'only' at the beginning of the third line invokes two possible meanings - that the rat is the 'only' live thing that moves in No Man's Land, and that its sudden appearance disrupts the poet's resignation of the opening two lines, 'only' having the significance of 'but'. The poet is firmly located between the two symbols of rat and poppy which seem to represent two kinds of 'survival'. I cannot accept Bergonzi's view that the rat represents "low, ugly vitality," (2) for Rosenberg has carefully ascribed to the rat sophisticated attributes - it "laughs inwardly", is 'sardonic', 'droll', has 'cosmopolitan sympathies.(3)

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(1) Isaac Rosenberg : CP. p. 73.

(2) B. Bergonzi : Heroes' Twilight. p. 115.

(3) Rosenberg : 'Break of Day', CP. p. 73.

What , indeed, Rosenberg is suggesting is that despite our natural reactions to it as a thing of scavenging horror, despite its apparent 'low, ugly vitality', it seems to know that it is better equipped for survival than humans,

Strong eyes, fine limbs, haughty athletes, (1)

not because of its basic if horrific way to survival, but because it does not engage in the arbitrary insanity that separates the English hand from the German, from the peculiarly human activity of war that is a process of self-destruction. The poppy also survives, but the fact that Rosenberg has pulled it,

To stick behind my ear,

has already signed its death-warrant. The concluding four lines of the poem develop this idea:

> Poppies whose roots are in man's veins
> Drop, and are ever dropping;
> But mine in my ear is safe,
> Just a little white with the dust.

The poppy became the emblem of the war dead after the great popularity of John Macrae's 'In Flanders Fields.' (2) The poppies seem to derive their colour and life from the dead of the war, and the image links them with death. Their life is short and transient; they 'drop, and are ever dropping', and when they drop, like the soldiers, they 'drop dead'. Not only is the poppy associated with the war dead, but through its colour with blood and through its properties with sleep. Though the parapets poppy in Rosenberg's ear is for the moment safe and

Just a little white with the dust,

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(1) ibid.

(2) John Macrae : 'In Flanders Fields', ULD. p.49.

its fate, and Rosenberg's, is already prefigured by the very fact that it has been pulled, and the 'dust' is the dust to which it is ordained both poet and poppy must inevitably and soon return. This idea is reinforced by 'white', which reminds us both of the pall and the pallor of death.

Technically, the success of the poem lies in the way in which the symbolism seems to grow organically from the poet's immediate situation, the dead,

Sprawled in the bowels of the earth,

are really and horribly dead, and the poem never allows us to forget the concrete realities. The tone, at times, suggests a sort of intellectual playfulness as Rosenberg, moved by the sad irony that man for all his pretensions to beauty and superiority is more vulnerable, through the particularly human urge to self-destruction called 'war', than the repulsive rat. But this tone never offends against the tragic moral import of the symbolic interpretation of the poem, because although Rosenberg does not find it funny, he can speculate that the rat might.

Criticism is not unanimous about 'Dead Man's Dump', and the division arises because there is a hiatus between the quality of much of it as poetry and its unity as a poem. Bergonzi writes:

> A. Alvarez has described it as the greatest poem by an Englishman to have been produced by the war, and I am inclined to agree. (1)

J.H. Johnston accords more with my personal assessment:

> - brilliant in parts, perceptive, compelling, but fragmentary and inchoate - is an epitome of (Rosenberg's) defects as well as his qualities as a poet. (2)

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(1) B. Bergonzi : Heroes'Twilight, London, 1965. p. 116.

(2) J.H. Johnston : English Poetry of the First World War, London, 1964. p. 246.

Interestingly enough, this seems to be Rosenberg's own feeling, and that of his closest literary friends. He wrote to Sir Edward Marsh in May:

> I don't think what I've written is very good but I think the substance is. (1)

By the end of the month, in his next letter to Marsh, he was accepting the criticism about the lack of form in the poem:

> Mr. Binyon has often sermonised lengthily over my working on two different principles in the same thing and I know how it spoils the unity of a poem. But if I couldn't before, I can now, I am sure, plead the absolute necessity of fixing an idea before it is lost, because of the situation it's conceived in. (2)

That 'Dead Man's Dump' is a moral statement is implicit in the very title. But it is something of a quite different order to the kind of moral protest that such a title usually prefaced, for it aspires to go beyond either the registering of moral outrage or of a personal moral anguish. But it reads as a composite of magnificent fragments. No sensitive ear could fail to respond to the superb images, could fail to perceive rich symbolic significance growing from the concrete realities, or not hear the visionary texture of Rosenberg's rhetoric. Its fault is that it is two poems, one narrative-descriptive in form with a moral purpose produced by the indignity of violent and degrading death; the other, in more visionary mode of exalted rhetoric. The failure is that the second does not really grow from the first. Formally, of course, it was a more demanding poem that 'Break of Day in Trenches', and the setting of 'a dump' perhaps did nothing to help give shape and unity to the poem.

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(1) Rosenberg : letter dated May 8th, 1917. Works ed. Bottomley & Harding, London 1937. p. 316.

(2) ibid : see pp. 316 - 7.

The first two stanzas are splendid. The poem opens with a straightforward account of the poet's situation as he takes a load of wire up to the Front.

> The plunging limbers over the shattered track
> Racketed with their rusty freight. (1)

But the 'freight' immediately acquires more symbolic significance:

> Stuck out like many crowns of thorns,
> And the rusty stakes like sceptres old
> To stay the flood of brutish men
> Upon our brothers dear.

The idea of being 'crucified' on the 'old barbed wire' is suggested, but given a new significance as it is placed beside the reference to futility of the wiring implicit in the allusion to Canute. One may be rather surprised by the separation of 'brutish men' and 'brothers dear', particularly in relation to the attitude in the fine scriptural lines of the second stanza, that envisages the essential unity of humanity.

> They lie there huddled, friend and foeman,
> Man born of man, and born of woman,
> And shells go crying over them
> From night till night and now.

But there is no contradiction here. Surely the poet's purpose is to reconcile the two observations by the intervening lines that describe the brutal indignity of death:

> The wheels lurched over the sprawled dead
> But pained them not, though their bones crunched.

The shift from the first attitude of partisan rhetoric is replaced by the vision of the oneness of the dead, as the crude indignity of the dead bodies has its effect. The language makes a corresponding shift as Death is, literally, the Leveller.

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(1) Isaac Rosenberg : 'Dead Man's Dump'. CP. pp. 81 - 84.

The subsequent six stanzas are in more elevated mode, as Rosenberg's imagination strives to find a relationship between life and death, between the dead and the earth. He attributes first an almost vampiristic quality to the earth in an extension of the pathetic fallacy.

> Earth has waited for them,
> All the time of their growth
> Fretting for their decay:

Rosenberg's concern is for the 'dark souls' Have these gone to the earth, as the bodies will?

> Somewhere they must have gone,
> And flung on your hard back
> Is their soul's sack
> Emptied of God - ancestralled essences.
> Who hurled them out? Who hurled?

'Hard Back' suggests perhaps that earth, once eager to compass their death, is now indifferent. After the 'Arnoldian touchstone' of 'Emptied of God - ancestralled essences', which has a Hebraic quality, the anguished questions come insistently at the end.

But his concern with the fate of the soul does not obscure the concrete reality of death:

> None saw their spirits' shadow shake the grass,
> Or stood aside for the half used life to pass
> Out of those doomed nostrils and the doomed mouth,
> When the swift iron burning bee
> Drained the wild honey of their youth.

That the blood, 'the wild honey', might pour from the nostrils and the mouth is all that is required to make the fate of the soul and the reality of the corpus co-existent. But the dead and the living seem to co-exist also where life is so precarious, and Rosenberg turns to the living:

> What of us, who flung on the shrieking pyre,
> Walk, our usual thoughts untouched,
> Our lucky limbs as on ichor fed,
> Immortal seeming ever?

Perhaps when the flames beat loud on us,
A fear may choke in our veins
And the startled blood may stop.

His choice of 'pyre' for the war surely prefigures that the living are similarly doomed. Those who survive may feel 'Immortal', but the use of 'lucky limbs', 'as on ichor fed' and 'seeming' stress the illusory quality of such life. That the living as well as the dead are committed to the pyre is implicit in the use of 'shrieking'. The last three lines of the stanza suggest to me the possibility that the ultimate death of the living may be in other terms than bullet or bayonet, but a 'psychological' death, perhaps, is envisaged when the pressure of the war may destroy the illusion of immortality. But the idea does not seem explicit enough for dogmatism.

The earth explodes, is 'loud with death'. But death does not come to all:

In bleeding pangs
Some born on stretchers dreamed of home,
Dear things, war-blotted from their hearts.

I am disturbed in reading this part of the poem by the multiple role ascribed to Earth. It was impatient, waiting for the dead, it was the hard-back that the dead were tossed on 'emptied of God-ancestralled essences.' Now, Rosenberg visions Earth as being raped by man.

Maniac Earth! howling and flying, your bowel
Seared by the jogged fire, the iron love,
The impetuous storm of savage love.
Dark Earth! Dark Heavens! swinging in chemic smoke,
What dead are born when you kiss each soundless soul
With lightning and thunder from your mined heart,
Which man's self dug, and his blind fingers loosed?

War is, as it were, man's lust towards a consummation which is self-destructive. Earth is the 'Mother'Nature, but only the 'dead are born'. The female principle is demanding, but is in turn 'raped', 'seard by the jagged love, the iron love'. Man, the male principle, motivated by the lust of war, rapes the earth, but the consummation

is not only unfruitful, but leaves man in a sort of post-coital emptiness of death. The 'blind fingers' suggest 'blind fingers in the night.' There is enough in both lexis and imagery to sustain the sexual and moral intepretation of the vision, but it does not evolve organically from what has gone before, and the transition back from this visionary mode to the narrative-descriptive is similarly inadequate. Perhaps, as I have suggested, the sexual imagery does try to unify Rosenberg's speculations, which do not 'continue in a loose and unco-ordinated fashion' (1) but have at least a shaping intent. But Johnston does clearly indicate the basic structural weakness of the poem:

> "The emotional intensity of these lines does not conceal the fact that they constitute the least satisfactory portion of the poem and one at odds with the compound of pathos and irony suggested by the title. We have departed from the narrative reality; we have been drawn into a series of tangential conceptions and visualisations that emerge from a specialised poetic imagination rather than from the reality itself; the hectic tone and the rhetorical outbursts threaten to disrupt the calm restraint of the previous stanzas. (2)

At this point Rosenberg again assumes that blending of narrative - descriptive that had so successfully shaped the opening two stanzas. The presentation of horrific detail:

> A man's brains splattered on
> A stretcher - bearer's face - (3)

is used to counterpoint the inadequacy of 'human tenderness.'

> They left this dead with the older dead,
> Stretched at the cross roads.

For the 'drowning soul' it is not only the cross roads of life and

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(1) J.H. Johnston : English Poetry of the First World War. p. 241.

(2) J.H. Johnston : ibid.

(3) Rosenberg : 'Dead Man's Dump', CP. p. 83.

death, but Rosenberg economically suggests both the unhallowed burial and crucifixion in a superbly rich image. The 'drowning soul' lies amongst the already dead, horribly discoloured and inanimate,

> Burnt black by strange decay
> Their sinister faces lie,
> The lid over each eye,

and the stanza suggests that their decayed remains are already partly absorbed into earth. Through the symbol of the man struggling with death,

> the choked soul stretched weak hands
> To reach the living world the far wheels said,
> The blood-dazed intelligence beating for light.

Rosenberg's climax, a plea, desperate and urgent, although beyond human aid, at least for human recognition. Death is not admirable, not heroic, in modern warfare: it divests man of human dignity and casts him beyond the reach of compassion. The climax of 'Dead Man's Dump' pleads that at least we recognise a <u>man</u> is dead.

What we can infer from this analysis of 'Dead Man's Dump' is that there is an affinity between Rosenberg's artistic convictions and aspirations and the moral attitudes the war evoked. He cannot be content with the effects of realism because truth for him was not to be found there. In his most effective poetry there is a successful fusion of realism and symbolism. As a painter, he might strive after the pictorial, and his imagistic poems often achieve splendid cameo effects. But his natural propensity as an image-maker, the product in part of his Hebraic heritage and in part of an interest in Imagiste poetry, led him to aspire to an objectivity that rejected the judgement, partly aesthetic, partly moral, that the true poetry of the war, in Owen's phrase, was 'in the pity.' 'Dead Man's Dump evokes our pity, but Rosenberg's compassion does not directly produce

the poem, in the sense that he strives to subordinate the personal emotional response rather than writing from it. Pity, for Rosenberg, was irrelevant ultimately, as it was for the stretcher-bearer. There is, too, a mystical visionary quality in Rosernberg, when his luxuriant rhetoric riots. It is often the conflict between the painter the image-maker, and the rhetorician, the visionary, that aggravates his not strong sense of form. In 'Dead Man's Dump' the observed details of reality can be invested with rich symbolic significance; we hear a majestic rhetoric that pushes at the door of truth. But the two modes do not integrate into a coherent unity.

But in Rosenberg's 'Trench Poems' there is a clarity and direction lacking in his pre-war poetry. Many of his shorter poems are technically accomplished. 'Dead Man's Dump', his most comprehensive moral statement, we have analysed above. But in 'Returning We Hear the Larks' and 'Day Break in Trenches' we have two poems where theme and technique blend most successfully.

Because of his intense involvement and the practical considerations Rosenberg felt that he could not achieve 'poetry' in the war. Poetry to him was a 'notation', which contributes also to its fragmentary quality.

> I will not leave a corner of my
> consciousness covered up, but saturate myself
> with the strange and extraordinary new conditions
> of this life, and it will all refine itself into
> poetry later on. (1)

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(1) Works. ed. Bottomley & Harding. 1937. p. 373, letter to Binyon, 1916.

What the poet could achieve was an intermediate statement, basically poetic, but the 'refining' of the artistic process was seen by Rosenberg to demand a 'later on', an artistic reconstruction. What he accepted, in fact, was the fundamentally Romantic concept of 'emotion recollected.' His achievement is not vitiated by his critical convictions. He was never a propagandist, nor an elegist. His work is without the curative or commemorative purpose of his contemporaries. His poetry is personal in the sense that its purpose is to record the experience of a poetic sensibility so that it might be refined into poetry. His concern was for poetry, for art, and he was perhaps the only combatant poet whose affinity with Aestheticism was sustained.

But it was left to Owen to bring the wheel full circle Rosenberg had never believed that war could be justified: 'Nothing can justify war'. (1) Participation was not for him a moral dilemma, though it raised artistic problems. But because Owen had defined moral responsibility for himself (as officer), moral guilt (as a participant) he was constantly concerned as an artist with moral issues. His evolving pacifist convictions did not permit of his withdrawal from the war at this point. His friend Sassoon tried this but found the dualism in his moral attitude too strong. What Owen did do, on the hypothesis of his own death and thus enforced withdrawal from the war, was to speculate on what the poet's function should be in the event of modern warfare. Thus the two conditions required by 'Strange Meeting' are that he should be abstracted from his immediate moral impasse, by death alone it seems, and that in the event of a different war, the poet's function should be non-involvement.

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(1) Works. ed. Bottomley & Harding, London, 1937. Letter to Marsh, December, 1915, p. 305.

There are two vital statements that help to define this position for us. One is his projected Preface to his collected poems; the other is 'Strange Meeting'.

Preface

> This book is not about heroes. English poetry is not yet fit to speak of them.
> Nor is it about deeds, or lands, nor anything about glory, honour, might, majesty, dominion, or power, except War.
> Above all, I am not concerned with Poetry.
> My subject is War, and the pity of War.
> The Poetry is in the pity.
> Yet these elegies are to this generation in no sense consolatory. They may be to the next. All a poet can do today is warn. That is why the true Poets must be truthful. (1)

These cryptic notes have been the basis of much speculation. But it is obvious that in his first three points Owen is rejecting values that are both moral and aesthetic. His rejection of 'heroes' is a rejection of conventional concepts of the heroic - brave deeds, splendid valour, hearts of oak. By 1916-18, as we have seen, Owen's heroes were the unheroes, the 'glum heroes', the hero victim, and here he does no more than endorse a fait accompli , though English poetry still pursuing some outmoded vision of beauty and truth, is not yet 'fit to speak of them'. As most of the poets who survived the Somme, he rejects all conventional abstractions, and he is not concerned with a poetry preoccupied by these. His subject is War, and the pity of War - two subjects really, the presentation of the realities of war, and the ethical base, in his case pity, from which such presentation must spring. The poetry, in turn, must derive from this ethical base - 'The Poetry is in the pity' - and form, structure, tone, emphasis, diction, will inevitably be dictated by the attitudes. It is Owen's Preface and he indicates only his own ethical base; I am sure he would

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(1) Wilfred Owen : 'Preface', CP. p. 31.

recognise others, social, political, as well as moral.

Finally he recognises that his poetry is fundamentally elegiac, commemorating the death of a generation and the passing of a way of life. The poet's function is not only to describe the actualities of war (the poet as journalist) to interpret the ills of war (the poet as propagandist); his duty goes beyond the realism and the curative intent - he must 'warn'. With this last observation he prepares the way for his ultimate position which he elaborates in 'Strange Meeting'. (1)

Thematically, 'Strange Meeting' moves from a re-statement of the greater love ideal in the immediate context of the encounter in Hell of two dead soldiers, one having killed the other before his own death, to an aesthetic statement in the second part of the poem. This progression is by no means accidental. For thus Owen indicates how his new realisation of the poet's function is rooted in his moral position. The superb use of assonance that hall-marks the poem is perhaps indicative of a similar intention. Assonance has the effect of producing rather melancholy discords, and at the same time allows him to retain the influence of rhyme variant while avoiding what is too specifically 'Poetry': His mastery of assonance is a reiterative melancholic part of his meaning, and reinforces the elegiac tone. The distinction, that is, that I discern between Rhyme and Assonance is related to the distinction he himself made between poetry and 'Poetry'.

But such aesthetic conviction is <u>implicit</u> in the struture and technique of the poem: the poem itself is an <u>explicit</u> statement, Owen's final statement, of his ultimate concept of the poet's function.

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(1) Wilfred Owen : 'Strange Meeting', <u>CP.</u> pp. 35 - 6.

That this conviction grew from his moral belief is implied in the very structure of the poem. It opens with a Dantesque vision of a Hell that still manages to remind us in some of its details of some huge Victorian subterranean railway station, its platforms littered with 'encumbered sleepers' waiting to entrain. Nor personally, do I never quite lose sight of the military realities of mining and sappage. This early part of the poem recollects also, Sassoon's 'The Rear-Guard.' (1)

> Alone he staggered on until he found
> Dawn's ghost that filtered down a shafted stair
> To the dazed, muttering creatures underground
> Who hear the boom of shells in muffled sound.

Sassoon was concerned only to record a horrific personal experience, to recreate and transmit the immediacy of his self-disgust and physical nausea. That achieved he can return to the war.

> At last with sweat of horror in his hair
> He climbed through darkness to the twilight air,
> Unloading hell behind him step by step. (2)

Owen, however, does not, cannot,'climb through darkness to the twilight air'. The duologue of the poem ends, 'Let us sleep now...', and this surely projects his own death as well as that of the'enemy he killed'. He remains, to confront the moral, personal and aesthetic implications of the war. His 'escape' from the battle is 'down some profound dull tunnel' to a hell made by war -

> long since scooped
> Through granites which titanic wars had groined. (3)

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(1) Siegfried Sassoon : 'The Rear-Guard', CP. p. 69.

(2) ibid.

(3) Owen : 'Strange Meeting', CP. p. 35.

The idea of 'escape' is sustained by his reaction to the man he encounters, the surprise that the other does not share his sense of relief to have effected an escape from the horrors of warfare.

> With a thousand pains that vision's face was grained;
> Yet no blood reached there from the upper ground,
> And no guns thumped, or down the flues made moan,

The assonantal 'grained' effectively echoes the earlier 'groined-groaned', suggesting perhaps that war has etched these tragic lines on the human face as it 'scooped' hollows of hell underground.

"Strange friend," I said, "here is no cause to mourn". But the other rejects any immediate satisfaction:

> "None," said that other, "save the undone years.
> The hopelessness. Whatever hope is yours,
> Was my life also; I went hunting wild
> After the wildest beauty in the world,
> Which lies not calm in eyes, or braided hair,
> But mocks the steady running of the hour,
> And if it grieves, grieves richlier than here.
> For of my glee might many men have laughed,
> And of my weeping something had been left,
> Which must die now. I mean the truth untold,
> The pity of war, the pity war distilled. (1)

His despair, 'hopelessness' derives from 'the undone years,' which suggest not only the years to come, as yet unlived, 'undone,' but the present 'undoing', disintegration, of what has gone before. For like Owen, the friend had been a poet, he had pursued beauty.

Which lies not calm in eyes, or braided hair, but which, in the Keatsian sense, had been in that permanence which art creates, that 'mocks' time; and which, if it involve pain, at least transforms that pain. Not only does this assertion, and the specific use of 'richlier' suggest something of the Romantic agony, but it rejects a purely experiential notation, untransmuted, of the crude hard pain in the context of the war.

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(1) ibid : 'Strange Meeting CP. p. 35.

His poetry, his 'glee' might have communicated something of his perception of life, its beauty, its joy and sadness, but this 'must die now.' The 'untold truth' is the 'pity of war', that pity which is the distillation of war. And he surely implies here more than an emotional compassion, a sympathy, which was, indeed, the shaping force for much of his poetry. This pity is more that of Othello:

> But yet the pity of it, Iago! O! Iago, the pity of it Iago. (1)

it is the compassionate commemoration of tragic necessity.

The next lines of the poem are richly prophetic, a universal 'trek from progress' in terms of satisfaction with the second-rate, violence or a sad retrogressing uniformity.

> Now men will go content with what we spoiled,
> Or, discontent, boil bloody, and be spilled.
> They will be swift with swiftness of the tigress.
> None will break ranks, though nations trek from progress.

The'friend's' participation in the war had brought an involvement that militated against art. As a poet he has achieved that position when he should help humanity by abstracting himself from the vain illogical violence of war. He now has the 'courage' and 'wisdom' and the 'mystery' and 'mastery' to shape and control these. Owen's choice of 'mystery' is interesting, suggesting not only insight into the unknown, but trade or skill, and 'mastery' suggests both 'control' and 'master-craftsman'. This choice of 'mystery' links with the choice earlier of 'glee', and anticipates the use of 'chariot-wheels' later. Owen sees that the poet's obligation is to restore, to heal, a world torn by bloodshed,

> when much blood had clogged their chariot-wheels,
> I would go up and wash them from sweet wells,
> Even with truths that lie too deep for taint.

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(1) Shakespeare : Othello. IV. i, 205.

There is the vivid use of 'clogged' (suggesting war stopped eventually not by reason nor principle, but from mere physical necessity) and the Wordsworthian echo in the third line - 'Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.' His will to give himself

> without stint
> But not through wounds; not on the cess of war.

is the expression of a pacificism not only for conscience's sake but for art's sake.

His oneness with his 'strange friend' is asserted at the end. 'Let us sleep now...' The 'strangeness' surely has been not that he is now the friend of the man he killed, but that they should ever have been estranged. It was only the paramount insanity of war that created the emotional barrier that made them enemies.

It does not seem to me to matter much whether Owen changed the lines

> I was a German conscript, and your friend. (1)

to ensure the significant anonymity of the two or to suggest that the 'strange friend' was his alter ego. The import of the poem, as an aesthetic statement rooted in moral conviction, remains the same.

The poem is characterised by a rich texture appropriate to the moral conviction and the elevated concept of the poet's function. It has an essentially literary quality, yet sustains a largely informal tone. It is, in effect, the accomplished voice of a reflective artist. Twice, the free movement of the speaking voice is suspended by antithetical couplets -

> And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall,
> by his dead smile I knew we stood in Hell

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(1) See CP. p. 36. footnote.

and later -

Courage was mine, and I had mystery,
Wisdom was mine, and I had mastery.

The first simply evidences his exercised control even when confronted with the realisation that he is in Hell; the second, by its antithesis, by the location of the four nouns at the four 'corners' of the couplet, suggest a completeness, 'mastery' exemplified. The assonance of 'mystery' 'mastery' suggest this same completeness, unlike the assonance throughout the poem, which produces an off-key melancholic note and reproduces, too, a sense of frustration.

Thus we have a poem where the aesthetic statement the poem makes is the organic consequence of the moral belief that induced that statement. The technical features are not experimental innovations but are related to and part of the overall significance of the poem. Owen restates his conviction of the essential brotherhood of men, the futile retrogression implicit in war, and combines both his lament for his premature artistic death with a declaration that pacificism is not only morally but aesthetically the only sanity.

'Dead Man's Dump' and 'Strange Meeting' seem two of the finest and fullest poetic statements to be made during the war. The measure of difference between them is perhaps that Rosenberg, as we have seen, regarded poetic notation (which would be 'refined'later.) as the only possibility. Owen, here, claims a 'mastery', with an assurance borne out by the unity of the poem. Although it would be impertinent to measure two very different but obvious poetic talents, we can distinguish between the formal control of 'Strange Meeting' and the fragmentation of 'Dead Man's Dump', and infer, from their differing attitudes to the process of poetic creation in modern war, at least part of an explanation.

There seems no doubt that the sense of moral outrage, a personal moral anguish, and the necessity of forging out of the bitter disillusionment a new ethical base, acted as a catalyst on Owen, and he came dramatically to his poetic stature in the shell-holes and trenches of No Man's Land.

> No gradual development brought his work to maturity.
> It was a forced growth, a revolution in his mind...
> The subject made the poet. (1)

And so integrated with his personal theme of 'War, and the Pity of War' was his poetic technical skill, that even during his great productive period from August 1917 to November 1918

> when he sought to write or finish (earlier)
> poems, we often notice in them a regression
> to his immature manner. (2)

And there is no reason to suppose that such poetic development based on this inter-relationship of theme and technique was unique to Owen. The post-war poetry of Sassoon, for example, show that the fusion of attitude and technique produced by the pressure of the war was the summit of his poetic achievement. His evolution reveals a minor Georgian grasping "the socially significant, shedding his romance under the compulsion of disillusionment and sympathy, freeing himself from rhetoric, and achieving by forthright rhythms, a new, often epigrammatic pungency". (3) But

> After the war, Mr. Sassoon continued to batter the shallow
> facades of complacency. His technique changed little.
> Occasionally a tedious mock-pedantry and an excessive
> alliteration went hand in hand with a certain peevishness..
> Mr. Sassoon's poetic development stopped here. (4)

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(1) C. Day Lewis : Intro. to Owen's Collected Poems, London, 1963. p. 12.

(2) ibid : p. 24.

(3) Geoffrey Bullough : The Trend of Modern Poetry, Edinburgh, 1934. pp. 97 - 8.

(4) ibid : P. 98.

Without benefit of critical theory or abstract aesthetic speculation, their actual poetic practice did much not only to destroy romantic illusions about war but the current dilutions of the romantic concept of poetry. Very often they failed to justify, even understand, what their practice was, and the best war poetry of Owen, Sassoon, Read, Rosenberg, the occasional achievements of even minor talents, was the consequence of raw poetic instinct reacting to intense moral pressure. In terms of aesthetics, they were men of their time, and their comments on the quality of their achievement are frequently expressions of dissatisfaction, wishing to write more objectively, more comprehensively, more dispassionately about their experience. Their self-criticism is apologetic. When a minor poet stumbled on a critical truth he dressed it up in whimsy, and presented it out of the normal critical 'register':

> On the whole I should rather fight shy of attempting to write prose in war time, even at home it's almost impossible to put in enough work on it. Verse is the easiest thing out, especially in the trenches. When one is walking about the line one can hardly help making quite good verse all the time, and it doesn't need, won't stand in fact, more polishing. When you are a bit highly strung and excited, verse comes as regular as the rations: but any sustained prose composition gives a strain one has no right to submit oneself to when on H.M.'s service. (1)

Despite the casual tone, does it not offer an explanation for the proliferation of 'quite good verse' during the war years? Is it not justified historically in that the poetry was forged in the white heat of experience, and the prose came like an avalanche a decade later. But it did offer the possibility of a critical base for the revaluation of their actual achievement, that current criticism is beginning to examine:

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(1) Charles Scott Moncrieff : Memories & Letters ed. J.M. Scott Moncrieff & L.W. Lunn, London, 1931. letter to Alec Waugh, dated Jan. 1918. p. 137.

> The effort to control, to transcend a shock is the inspiration of much modern verse: as vital to work as prolonged concentration. (1)

The contemporary critic who offered this generalisation (which accords with Scott Moncrieff's experience) is willing to apply it in the re-assessment of, say, Owen's 'Exposure.' He pays tribute to the skill with which Owen could use even the rather worn implement of Georgian diction:

> Georgian observation and wise passiveness are present in 'Exposure,' and appear to be coping with the visitations of technics - 'low, drooping flares,' 'Northward, incessantly, the flickering gunnery rumbles far off, like a dull rumour of some other war' - with aplomb. (2)

But the essence of the poem is not in such control and modulation;

> The poem lives on its nerves. The jumpy complacence and frustrate, wilful rhythm, kept on the alert by the foiled purposefulness of the half-rhyme, is a device for framing stasis; it allows time not for 'a hundred visions and revisions' such as Mr. Prufrock was prognosticating at home, but to ask leading questions - 'What are we doing here?' 'Is it that we are dying?' (3)

Owen's poetry has "done more than any other work in English to form a sensibility that can grasp the nature of technological warfare. If Brooke and Binyon seem irrevocably anarchronistic, then that is largely because of what we have learnt from Owen." (4) The only thing wrong with this is that its implications are too exclusive. If poetry before 1916 seems irrevocably anachronistic (with the exception of Charles Hamilton Sorley) it is because post-Somme poetry has made it so.

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(1) Frederick Grubb : A vision of reality. A study of Liberalism in Twentieth Century Verse. London, 1965. p. 79.

(2) ibid : p. 79.

(3) ibid : p. 80.

(4) Bernard Bergonzi : Heroes Twilight, London, 1965. p. 134.

Such a generalisation is inevitably fallible, but it is more accurate, perhaps in that it switches the attention from the achievement of one powerful poetic sensibility to the impact of the war on a generation's experience, and their reaction to it.

Under moral pressures, confronted with the apparent irrelevance or inadequacy of organised religion, they were forced to a troubled exploration. (1) Old 'truths' were discarded. Confronted with the apparent apathy and continued delusions of the population at home, they were impelled into a fiercely curative intent; implicitly, this involved both moral and social commitment. As the war continued in apparently futile prolongation, the contact between 'Over here' and 'Over there' became a complex of incomprehension and hostility. Not only were the combatants shocked by the realities of death in a modern war, but the division between Blighty and No Man's Land was seen in terms of Life and Death. Sassoon's disabled soldier has lost a leg, but now he is

Safe with his wound, a citizen of life (2)

but the soldiers at the Front are

citizens of death's grey land (3)

Owen was the elegist for the death of a generation; Blunden wrote of the corruption of the natural order; Read analysed fear in relation to death; Rosenberg and Owen were concerned at the 'death' of the artistic sensibility. The scale and quality of death impinged on all. And as Dr. Johnson wrote to Boswell,

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(1) C.E. Montague : Disenchantment, London,1968 p. 61. "men would set to and dig out of themselves, not knowing what it was, the clay of which the bricks are made with which religions are built"

(2) Sassoon : 'The One-Legged Man,' CP. p. 26.

(3) Sassoon : 'Dreamers,' CP. p. 7.

> when a man knows he is to be
> hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates
> his mind wonderfully. (1)

The continual prospect of evisceration and mutil ation at the next dawn must have been the agent for intense mental concentration.

It is nonsense to talk of these poets writing in a diluted and inadequate tradition. War transmuted their inheritance, and by 1918 poetry was enriched by experiment and experience. The changes effected were of different kinds.There was, as we have seen, a constant re-defining of the poet's function. At different points of the war different poets saw themselves primarily as reporters, propagandists, interpreters, advocates, satirists, elegists, healers and visionaries. We can discern, too, a parallel to the massive lexical shift we noted in the previous section of this thesis. There was progressive enrichment of the texture of poetry, in imagery and metaphor. As in relation to the pastoral romantic tradition, truth was no longer seen to equate with the beautiful. Physically, the crucifixion was grotesque now, painful, cruel, crude; spiritually, it was frequently the consequence of a lie.

Formally, there was endless experimentation. We have discussed in some detail the narrative attempts of Blunden, Sassoon and Read, not to tell a story but to make moral statements. The short introspective static Georgian lyric had become terse, colloquial, dramatic. In Sassoon's hand it became anecdotal, its concluding question or statement expressing Sassoon's own sense of moral outrage, but inviting also the wider moral question.

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(1) Letter to Boswell, dated 19th September, 1777.

Satire and irony became weapons of the war on the national conscience, and here they learned much from Hardy and Housman, about brevity and economy, about the tension that can be produced between complex significance and the apparent simplicity of diction. The instinct of the best young poets was right, though perhaps Owen was the only one who really trusted his instinct. The others, like many critics, were still bedevilled by the concept of a relationship between 'war' and 'the heroic'. Confronted with public ignorance, and themselves surprised, their instinct told them that "The heroic is protest not resignation." (1) Grubb claims rightly that

> sacrifice in Owen is not an ethic; in three poems at least he proclaims its perversion. Abraham slays Isaac (and half the seed of Europe) in 'Parable'; the hopes of the recruit's family in 'S.I.W.' - 'proud to see him going, aye, and glad' - and 'Inspection' where the world 'washes out its stains by red cheeks, objecting 'young blood.'(2)

Sacrifice only became ethically valid in terms of the 'greater love'.

The need to apply current critical criteria to a re-assessment of First World War poetry is indicated, too, by the strictures of Douglas Jerrold, for the spirit and letter of his comments on the war book still haunt critical judgement of the poetry also.

> Every one of these books...deals with every conceivable kind of struggle except of one army against another, of one people against another. (3)

War poetry does not profess to be this: indeed, in the physical situation of time and place, could not. But what critical taboo invalidates the war of man and his conscience, or a poetry that expresses a sense of oneness with the enemy, that expresses the doubts and fears

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(1) Frederick Grubb : A Vision of Reality, London, 1965. p. 81.

(2) ibid.

(3) Douglas Jerrold : 'The Lie about the War', Criterion Miscellany, No. 9. 1930. p. 17.

and sense of inadequacy of the individual, that celebrates comradeship, that castigates apathy, insensibility, that concerns itself with artistic endeavour in defiance of the immediate military situation; for to see modern war exclusively on the grand scale postulated by Jerrold, is equally partial.

> The whole of these books deal with specifically ordinary people. They do not show the poet, the artist, the statesman or the man of religion sacrificed, yet this is the only legitimate tragedy of war. (1)

It is not my concern to discuss the validity of this in relation to the prose, the poetry patently does show the 'tragedy' of the poet. Perhaps that is all, ultimately, it can do. But behind the rejection implicit in 'specifically ordinary people' one detects perhaps an insistence on the 'hero', the epic, Aristotelian notions of the tragic protagonist. The protest of the combatant poets was against the false ideals relating to war, life, death and human relationships. In this protest they were 'anti-heroes', those who represented a rebellion against the ideals then dominant: their protest was to question the degradation and de-humanising indignity that reduced 'the specifically ordinary men', the'un heroes' of the war, to less than human stature.

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(1) ibid : p. 43.

SECTION IV

In the last section we discussed an aspect of the First World War that was historically unique - that as the military impasse was prolonged the initial sense of national unity and moral impetus was dissipated, and replaced by a unity of combatants, extended in some ways even to the enemy. For the combatants were the citizens of 'death's grey land', sharing a way of living and a way of dying that the outer worlds of national groups almost wilfully, it seemed, refused to comprehend. In view of this, it was improbable that specific social and political concerns of Blighty would be singularly relevant in that alien world 'blasted and bombadiered' from the soil of France and Flanders.

Further, despite the fact that these four years were inset in a period of great social and political flux, and that a number of political crises directly relevant to the conduct of the war marked these years, there is really little reason for our expectation that such change and crisis will be explicitly manifest in the poetry of the combatant poets. Hindsight, looking back over two world wars now, sees that the soldier tends to suspend his political allegiances and hopes in the interest of the national unity and wider generalised ideals:

> All were so deeply absorbed in winning that no practical upshot of all their new thoughts about England's diseases was yet taking shape in their minds. (1)

Again, the soldier-poets were predominantly bourgeois in social origin, and were men of their time, limited in their attitudes by their socio-political inheritance:

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(1) C.E. Montague : Disenchantment, London, 1968. (first published 1922.) p. 42.

> "the year 1914 is a turning point only in the sense that the more pressing problems could no longer be ignored. The extent of these unsolved problems was, however, partly concealed from the pre-war generation by its sense of the unshakeable character of its daily life and institutions. (1)

No problem in the trenches was more 'pressing' than that of staying alive. Certainly, the inviolability of many institutions was an article of faith for many when war broke out. We have seen how the organised church became suddenly vulnerable, and toppled from its pedestal. But the church was only one such institution in the social complex:

> The country as a whole, although not unaware of foreign competition and foreign enmity, had no serious forebodings of the great war and the great economic setbacks that were to follow it; it took for granted King, Lords, and Commons (with some coolness towards the Lords), the capitalist system, the free and established churches, progress, the poor, and the British Empire; but it was the possibility of fundamental change, rather than the case for social or other reform, which was in doubt. Industrial strikes and suffragette violence were evidence of the frustration of any serious hope of upsetting the established order in industry or politics, rather than of the absence of criticism.(2)

The White Cliffs of Dover seemed a bastion against change as well as a symbol of insular impregnability:

> The spirit of our fathers is not quelled.
> With weapons valid even as those they bore,
> Domain, Throne, Altar, still may be upheld,
> So we disdain, as they disdained of yore,
> The foreign froth that foams against our shore,
> Only by its white cliffs to be repelled. (3)

The contradiction between, say, W.E. Henley's nationally-charged imperial arrogance and attacks on the inner national 'softness' is only apparent. Similar sentiments can be encountered in Mein Kampf:

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(1) W.N. Medlicott : Contemporary England, 1914 - 64. London, 1967. p. 3.

(2) W.N. Medlicott : Contemporary England, 1914 - 64. London, 1967. p. 3.

(3) Alfred Austin : 'Why England is Conservative', HUSS, p. 10.

> In our bounty half the world hath shared.
> They hate us, or they envy? Envy and hate
> Should drive them to the pit's edge? Be it so!
> That race is damned which misesteems its fate,
> And this, in God's good time they all shall know,
> And know you too, you good green England, then
> Mother of mothering girls and governing men. (1)

Rigorous demands can be made on the population to counteract any symptom of that inner 'softness' by which alone can England fail to fulfil her great imperial destiny.

> In a golden fog,
> A large, full-stomached faith in kindliness
> All over the world, the nation, in a dream
> Of money and love and sport, hangs at the paps
> Of well-being, and so
> Goes fattening, mellowing, dozing, rotting down
> Into a rich deliquium of decay. (2)

Of course, Henley's viewpoint was extreme, and stated in an extravagant rhetoric, but the same sense of national pride coupled with a general sense of lassitude, can be seen in many Georgian bourgeois statements. But although there was dissatisfaction, and an admission that all was not well with their world, there was little of revolutionary urgency in their social criticism.

> If(the young melancholiasts of today) do not know how to take it out of mankind by writing desolatory verses about ashes and dust in the English Review, at least they can, if they be workmen, vote for a strike: they thus achieve the same good end and put it beyond a doubt that they don't think all is well with the world. (3)

There was little recognition that the "caged beast" was about to escape.

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(1) W.E. Henley : 'Envy', PPER, p. 72.

(2) W.E. Henley : 'Epilogue', HUSS, p. 13.

(3) C.E. Montague : Disenchantment, London, 1968. p. 9.

Philosophically, it might well be true that "the truth about peace is disclosed in war, the caged beast escapes," (1) but such 'truth' is perceived only retrospectively. The immediate soldier's concern is with the contingencies of the war itself. By the time a man was a soldier, and the First World War was really the first time this kind of transition has been required, the concerns that operated had experienced a shift of centre. We have seen how this chasm that opened between Blighty and the Western Front was the result of diverging moral values, and this can be paralleled in the socio-political context. Indeed, C.E. Montague could mark critically a pronounced political difference of centre:

> All of us could mention a few politicians, at least, to whom the Great War was merely a passing incident or momentary interruption of the more burningly authentic wars of Irish Orange and Green, or of English Labour and Capital. (2)

There is a further general point we should not ignore: the current Romantic concepts of poetry maintained the notion that there were 'poetic' subjects. The Georgians, who had opposed the Edwardians because they debased poetry by making it the servant of propaganda, of party, of ideology, were unlikely themselves to climb up on the hustings, even if some of them ventured to the pulpit. One can see a marked contrast between Pro Patria et Rege, a primarily Edwardian anthology in which there is considerable overtly orientated political propaganda, and The Music in Arms, more representative of the Georgian spirit, which has virtually no explicit political observation. It is worth noting, too, in corroboration, that most of the well-known and sharpest political epigrams provoked by the war crises

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(1) Frederick Grubb : A Vision of Reality. A Study of Liberalism in Twentieth Century Verse, London, 1965. p. 75.

(2) C.E. Montague : Disenchantment, London, 1968. p. 90.

were from the older generation of poets - Kipling, Chesterton, Hardy - and came later in, or after, the war. Typical is Kipling's terse recriminating couplet -

> If any mourn us in the workshop, say
> We died because the shift kept holiday. (1)

- or D.S. MacColl's bitter pun on Lloyd George's unfortunate appeal that "we must keep on striking, striking, striking..." -

> We do: the present desperate stage
> Of fighting brings us luck;
> And in the higher war we wage
> (For higher wage) we struck. (4)

The social and political objectives that the young combatants were fighting for tended to be on the grand scale and dissociated from specific political fracas that disrupted the Home Front. Hints of bitterness regarding, say, the Munitions Crisis are there in combatant poetry, but much less explicit, and not the raison d'etre of the poem. When, for instance, Sassoon describes the German artillery barrage

> with five-nines
> Traversing, sure as fate, and never a dud, (2)

or Graves retells the story of David and Goliath (3) there are implications of the quality and scarcity of munitions. But the general feeling was that there was a war to be won, and that some kind of new and better order would be the product of victory. It was the grand aim, and most soldiers, even in World War II, have directed their energies towards it. The historic framework of the war, the great changes - diplomatic, economic, socio-political, imperial - that were at work in Europe, were of little immediate relevance. And even those issues that roused relevant political controversy -

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(1) Kipling : 'Batteries out of Ammunition,' Kipling's Verse, London, 1933. p. 383.

(2) Sassoon : 'Counter-Attack', CP. p. 68.

(3) Graves : 'David and Goliath', See this thesis pp. 154 - 5.

(4) D.S. MacColl: 'The Miners' Response', ULD. p. 75.

the munitions crisis of 1915, Conscription, Irish Home Rule, the Easter Rebellion, Labour relations and, to some extent, the Peace Movement - impinged only marginally and implicitly on their poetry.(1)

When the war began most poets, Georgian and Edwardian, anticipated a great national effort, and there was a dominant sense of national unity:

> Most of those volunteers of the prime were men of handsome and boundless illusions. Each of them quite seriously thought of himself as a molecule in the body of a nation that was really, and not just figuratively, 'straining every nerve' to discharge an obligation of honour. (2)

John Freeman was one who sustained such illusions most fervently:

> There is not anything more wonderful
> Than a great people moving towards the deep
> Of an unguessed and unfeared future; nor
> Is aught so dear of all held dear before
> As the new passion stirring in their veins
> When the destroying Dragon wakes from sleep. (3)

For Binyon, also, the outbreak of war signalised an abandonment of embittering partisan squabbles:

> We step from days of sour division
> Into the grandeur of our fate. (4)

Inevitably, in the first few months of the war there was an enormous output of rhetorical doggerel that reflected not so much attitudes to the war as attitudinising about it. The worst kind of Edwardian political rhetoric, banal, cliche-ridden, posturing, sentimental in appeal, hitched its wagon to the war machine. It has no merit, other than the historical or inadvertently comic.

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(1) For a clear short account see W.N. Medlicott, Contemporary England 1914 - 64. London, 1967, pp. 1 - 173.

(2) C.E. Montague : Disenchantment, London, 1968. p. 10.

(3) John Freeman : 'Happy is England Now', 1914, ULD. p. 8.

(4) Lawrence Binyon : 'The Fourth of August', ULD. p. 7.

But we must keep in mind that the prolific output of such jingoistic rhetoric was a factor in determining the reaction of the younger poets against the direct social-political commitment of poetry. Technically, it is interesting to note how the sentiments are bolstered by recourse to familiar metrical patterns. The Church Hymnary was perhaps the greatest single influence. (1) But Burns' 'Scots Wha Hae' was brought into service -

> Kaiser-ridden Germany!
> We will set your millions free
> From a vile autocracy,
> Proud and burdensome!
> 'Neath the War-Fiend's evil power,
> Ogre that doth all devour,
> Europe shall no longer cower:
> We will strike it down! (2)

- as was the national anthem :

> May just and righteous laws
> Uphold the public cause,
> And bless our isle:
> Home of the brave and free,
> The land of liberty,
> We pray that still on thee
> Kind heaven may smile. (3)

The political aims of this verse were as blatant and unsubtle as it was technically crude. There was, almost immediately, a powerful propagandist attempt to bring the United States into the war, to align the Americans with the Allies at least morally if not militarily. We find, even then, the 'special relationship' (that has been much quoted since 1945) being pleaded.

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(1) See for example 'Hymn in Time of War', by Lord Burghclere, PPER p. 50, 'The Call to Arms', by Bertram Dobell, PPER p. 67.

(2) Bertram Dobell : 'Battle Song', PPER. p. 69.

(3) W.E. Hickson : 'God Bless our Native Land', PPER p. 75.

A message to bond and thrall to wake:
For wherever we come, we twain,
The throne of the tyrant shall rock and quake,
And his menace be void and vain;
For you are lords of a strong, young land,
and we are lords of the main. (1)

Harold Begbie was even more emotive in his approach, and his poem 'Neutral' is, roughly, the verse equivalent of the notorious poster, 'What did you do in the War, Daddy?', contextualised into an appeal for American commitment, at least to a moral alignment:

We ask not that your shells should shriek
Above the flaming hill we climb,
But speak, O sons of Lincoln, speak!
Silence in such an hour is crime.
Your children judge you if you stand
In hearing of the Belgian cry,
Not only with the folded hand,
But with the cold, averted eye. (2)

There was inevitably, too, a vivid presentation of 'Prussian' atrocity and brutality. Just as England was symbolised by a past of Drake or Nelson or the bowmen of Agincourt, so the German 'Hun' origins were exploited:

The fruit of German "culture" we behold
Displayed in lurid hues of blood and flame;
We see its devotees their creed unfold,
The law of Attila anew proclaim.
Unchivalrous, unmerciful, unsparing,
Without a touch of feeling or remorse,
The execration of all nations daring
To prove themselves apostles of brute force:
The modern Huns they have shown themselves indeed,
The worst and foulest of the evil breed. (3)

The 'rape' of 'little Belgium' roused a similar emotive rhetoric. (4)

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(1) Alfred Austin : 'A Voice from the West', PPER, p. 40.

(2) Harold Begbie : 'Neutral', PPER, p. 41.

(3) Bertram Dobell : 'The Destruction of Louvain', PPER, p. 64.
See also 'The Prussian Atrocities', PPER, p. 65.

(4) See Lawrence Binyon, 'To the Belgians', PPER, p. 44.

Charles Hamilton Sorley's sonnet, 'To Germany' is rather isolated amidst all this propagandist rhetoric. The fact that it is within the discipline of the sonnet form prepares us for a more reflective attitude. Sorley was actually in Germany when the war began, and he was not stampeded by the war fever into the emotive doggerel of so many of his elders.

> You are blind like us. Your hurt no man designed,
> And no man claimed the conquest of your land.
> But, gropers both through fields of thought confined,
> We stumble and we do not understand.
> You only saw your future bigly planned,
> And we, the tapering paths of our own mind,
> And in each other's dearest ways we stand,
> And kiss and hate, And the blind fight the blind.
>
> When it is peace, then we may view again
> With new-won eyes each other's truer form,
> And wonder. Grown more loving-kind and warm,
> We'll grasp firm hands and laugh at the old pain,
> When it is peace. But, until peace, the storm,
> The darkness, and the thunder and the rain. (1)

Reason and feeling are held in delicate balance; the mind that rejected the attitude also rejected the rhetoric.

Sorley's choice of 'loving-kind' (above) is interesting, for it anticipates Hardy's Armistice Day summation:

> Philosophies that sages long had taught,
> And Selflessness, were as an unknown thought,
> And 'Hell!' and 'Shell!' were yapped at Loving-Kindness. (2)

There were some of the older generation of poets that felt, with Lord Grey of Falloden that the lights being extinguished throughout Europe would not be so easily relit, that a way of life was passing and the old order changing:

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(1) C.H. Sorley : 'To Germany', MIA p. 149.

(2) Thos. Hardy : 'And there was a Great Calm', 11th November, 1918. HUSS. pp. 73 - 4.

Our world has passed away,
In wantonness o'erthrown
There is nothing left today
But steel and fire and stone! (1)

And here, amidst much rhetoric, a genuine elegiac note can sound, taken up later by Wilfred Owen when he prognosticated that 'the former happiness' would be 'unreturning' (2)

But at the outset the great sustaining illusion, parallel to the concept of crusade in the moral-religious sphere, was of a social and political oneness. It was a national unity, but more than that. Social class divisions would evaporate; men at home, like those at the Front, would be motivated by this sense of a nation moving inexorably to fulfil its high destiny; from the corners of Empire, Canadians, Australians, New Zealanders, Sikhs and Hindus, would pour to the aid of the Motherland; France and Britain were girded by an entente of common aspiration and purpose. In a sense, the social and political concern of poetry in the war is to recount the progressive disintegration of the sense of oneness. For it was, in Montague's words, "the paradise the bottom fell out of".

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(1) Kipling : 'For All We Have and Are'. (1914) A Choice of Kipling's Verse, ed. T.S. Eliot, London, 1941. p. 140.

(2) Wilfred Owen : 'Happiness', CP. p. 93.

Writing in 1922, he compared the contemporary situation with the early war illusion:

> It seems hardly credible now, in this soured and quarrelsome country, and time, that so many men of different class and kinds, thrown together at random, should ever have been so simply and happily friendly, trustful and keen. But they were, and they imagined that all their betters were too. That was the paradise that the bottom fell out of. (1)

And the progressive 'disenchantment' analysed in Montague's trenchant reminiscence was the inevitable consequence when so much social and political enthusiasm had been built on so much sand. The sense of unity that was the basis of optimism soon dissipated when the volunteer army made contact with the actuality of the war. The social 'marriage' that had been hoped for is ironically dismissed by Montague, and by the time conscription became effective in 1916 the 'old order' had been emphatically re-asserted. As Montague's old Regular Army colonel said, with obvious satisfaction, "the war was settling down to peace conditions." (2) 'Sanity was returning':

> Those whom God had put asunder
> it was less recklessly joining together. The first wild generosities were cooling off. Not many peers and heirs-apparent to great wealth were becoming hospital orderlies now. Since the first earthquake and tidal wave the disturbed social waters had pretty well found their old seemly levels again; under conscription the sons of the poor were now making privates; the sons of the well-to-do were making officers; sanity was returning. (3)

Something of this restored social status quo is implicit in Sassoon's 'Memorial Tablet'. There is a raw irony in the poor recruit's voice. Recruited under Lord Derby's Scheme he was swallowed by the mud of Passchendaele.

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(1) C.E. Montague : Disenchantment, London, 1968. p. 16.

(2) ibid : p. 97.

(3) ibid : p. 97.

> Two bleeding years I fought in France, for Squire:
> I suffered anguish that he's never guessed.
> Once I came home on leave, and then went west..
> What greater glory could a man desire. (1)

The going to war 'for Squire' implies almost a feudalism.

Consequent on this collapse of the Utopian dream of a 'New Deal' and 'Land Fit For Heroes', reinforced as it was by the moral gulf that separated No Man's Land from Blighty, the young turned in anger on those institutions that had seemed inevitable parts of the social fabric. The Press was one such victim:

> Most of the men had, all their lives, been accepting 'what it says 'ere in the paper' as being presumptively true. They had taken the Press at its word without checking. Bets had been settled by reference to a paper. Now, in the biggest event of their lives, hundreds of thousands of men were able to check for themselves the truth of that workaday Bible. (2)

Sassoon's 'Editorial Impressions' makes gentle mockery of the pretentious aspirations of the journalist who writes a little book called EUROPE ON THE RACK, and hopes that he's "caught the feeling of 'The Line'" and the invincible spirit of the men. The young wounded soldier is suitably modest:

> Ah, yes, but it's the Press that lead the way. (3)

But in 'Fight to a Finish' when he envisages the returning troops having 'a cushy job' at last, in cleaning out the political stables, it is the Press and politicians that he singles out for particular savagery:

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(1) Sassoon : 'Memorial Tablet', CP. p. 104.

(2) C.E. Montague : Disenchantment, p. 77.

(3) Sassoon : 'Editorial Impressions', CP. p. 78.

I heard the Yellow-Pressmen grunt and squeal;
And with my trusty bombers turned and went
To clear those Junkers out of Parliament. (1)

His choice of 'yellow' for the press and 'Junkers' for the politicians is indicative of a real combatant's animosity. Owen, in 'Smile, Smile, Smile' expresses the bitterness of those who have 'packed up their troubles' for ever, and who have died or are wounded, perhaps, for a tomorrow that is just a repeat of yesterday.

Head to limp head, the sunk-eyed wounded scanned
Yesterday's Mail; the casualties (typed small)
And (large) Vast Booty from our Latest Haul.
Also, they read of Cheap Homes, not yet planned
"For," said the paper "when this war is done
The men's first instinct will be making homes.
Meanwhile their foremost need is aerodromes. (2)

Owen links his criticism of Press attitudes and values to his observation about the Two Nations. As the Press article builds to its climax the word ' Nation ' in conjunction with 'Integrity' leads to Owen's assertion:

Nation? - The half-limbed readers did not chafe
But smiled at one another curiously
Like secret men who know their secret safe.
(This is the thing they know and never speak,
That England one by one had fled to France,
Not many elsewhere now, save under France). (3)

But some idea of the contempt for 'the warriors of the pen' that journalistic propaganda, distortion and pretention evoked may be gathered from this 'flyting' verse in The Nation:

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(1) Sassoon: 'Fight to a Finish', CP.p. 78.

(2) Wilfred Owen : 'Smile, Smile, Smile', CP. p. 77.

(3) ibid :

And I read the Blighty papers, where the
warriors of the pen
Tell of 'Christmas in the trenches' and 'The
Spirit of our men.'
And I saved the choicest morsels, and
I read them to my chum,
And he muttered, as he cracked a louse
and wiped it off his thumb:
'Many a thousand chats from Belgium crawl
their fingers as they write;
May they dream they're not exempted till
they faint with mortal fight;
May the fattest rats in Dickesbusch
race over them in bed;
May the lies they've written choke them
like a gas cloud till they're dead;
May the horror and the torture and
the things they never tell
(For they only write to order) be
reserved for them in Hell. (1)

Edward Thomas rejected the right of politicians or philosopers to dictate why he should fight, and rejected too both the emotive patriotism and emotive anti-Prussianism drummed up by the press.

This is no case of petty right or wrong
That politicians or philosophers
Can judge, I hate not Germans, nor grow hot
With love of Englishmen, to please newspapers. (2)

This voice we hear here is saner and more compassionate; it is a voice, too, that has achieved a personal point of view. It has nothing of the rhetorical relish with which Eden Phillpotts pronounced the need for immediate surgery:

Surgeon her world! Let myriad-scalpels bright
Flash in her sores with all thy bitter might,
So that their aching cease,
Cut clean the cursed canker that doth foul
Her spirit; tent and cleanse her sorry soul,
And give her bosom peace. (3)

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(1) Anon : 'Any Soldier to His Son', Nation Vol. 24. p. 221. dated November, 1918.

(2) Edward Thomas : 'This is no Case of Petty Right or Wrong', ULD. p. 44.

(3) Eden Phillpotts : 'Germania', HUSS. p. 104.

The rhetoric here betrays perhaps a greater delight at the prospect of surgery than at the possibility of cure.

Politicians, during the course of the war, became overdrawn on credibility. The soldier had come to hold the politician guilty for the war, for its course, and for its prolongation. They felt cheated, and had no confidence that the promises for a better tomorrow would be honoured by the men who made them. Yet the most pungent and direct indictments of contemporary politicians come from the older generation of poets. Kipling was stung into bitterness by the death of his son:

> I could not dig, I dared not rob:
> Therefore I lied to please the mob.
> Now all my lies are proved untrue
> And I must face the men I slew.
> What tale shall serve me here among
> Mine angry and defrauded young? (1)

There is an almost revolutionary urgency in his 'Mesopotamia', in contrast to the epigrammatic quality of the above poem, there is the familiar swinging line, but harnessed to sentiments of bitterness and anger:

> Our dead shall not return to us while Day and Nigh divide -
> Never while the bars of sunset hold.
> But the idle-minded overlings who quibbled while they died,
> Shall they thrust for high employment as of old?
>
> Shall we only threaten and be angry for an hour?
> When the storm is ended shall we find
> How softly but how swiftly they have sidled back to power
> By the favour and contrivance of their kind?
>
> Their lives cannot repay us - their death could not undo-
> The shame that they have laid upon our race,
> But the slothfulness that wasted and the arrogance that slew,
> Shall we leave it unabated in its place? (2)

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(1) Kipling : 'A Dead Statesman', in 'Epitaphs of the War', (1914 - 18). C.P.

(2) Kipling : 'Mesopotamia' ULD. p. 66. Written 1917.

Similarly, Chesterton's 'Elegy in a Country Churchyard' is an elegy not only for the 'two nations' of those who worked at home and those who fought abroad, but an elegy that those who ruled are still alive.

> The men that worked for England
> They have their graves at home:
> And bees and birds of England
> About the cross can roam.
>
> But they that fought for England,
> Following a falling star,
> Alas, alas, for England
> They have their graves afar.
>
> And they that rule in England,
> In stately conclave met,
> Alas, alas, for England
> They have no graves as yet. (1)

But it is pseudo-elegy, and has nothing of the genuine elegiac tone that informed early regrets for the passing of a way of life or Owen's later lament for the death of a generation.

The combatant poets' hostility to politics grew from a conviction that the 'lies' that had induced them to fight in the first place were replaced now by spurious political justifications for the prolongation of the war. Similarly, it was feared that the political promises for a better world to follow would be shown equally hollow. W.N. Ewer, for example, unites all the soldiers of different nationalities, as the victims held in the web of political chicanery. The refrain suggests the childlike naivete of the infants' hymn 'Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so.' The faith in the political illusion is simply but effectively counterpointed by a sharp irony:

> I gave my life for freedom - This I know
> For those who bade me fight had told me so. (2)

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(1) Chesterton : 'Elegy in a Country Churchyard', MWMA. p. 80.

(2) W.N. Ewer : 'Five Souls', HUSS. p. 59.

Sassoon's celebrated gesture, in throwing his M.C. into the Mersey, against the political prolongation of the war has its poetic parallel:

> Goodbye, old lad! Remember me to God,
> And tell Him that our Politicians swear
> They won't give in till Prussian Rule's been trod
> Under the Heel of England..Are you there?...
> Yes.. and the War won't end for at least two years;
> But we've got stacks of men..(1)

But the irony here is raw and unsubtle. His attack on the diplomatic incompetence has more polish. As he read the memoirs of a 'defunct' diplomat, he expresses his delight at the insight it afforded into the political 'machine'. The concluding lines, while being clear and neat in intent, have nevertheless managed to suggest something of the richly abstract and artificial register of diplomatic jargon:

> But I,for one, am grateful, overjoyed,
> And unindignant that your punctual pen
> Should have been so constructively employed
> In manifesting to unprivileged men
> The visionless officialised fatuity
> That once kept Europe safe for Perpetuity. (2)

All of these ideas are linked in the anonymous 'Soldier's Testament', a clear and angry statement of many soldiers' fears. It is simple, direct, and what it lacks in texture and poetic quality it compensates for to some extent in sincerity:

> If after I am dead
> On goes the same old game,
> With monarchs seeing red
> And ministers aflame,
> And nations drowning deep
> In quarrels not their own,
> And peoples called to reap
> The woes they have not sown;...
> If all we who are slain
> Have died, despite our hope
> Only to twist again
> The old kaleidoscope -

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(1) Sassoon : 'To Any Dead Officer', CP. pp. 84 - 5.

(2) ibid : 'On Reading the War Diary of a Defunct Ambassador', CP. pp. 129 - 30.

Why then, by God! we're sold!
Cheated and wronged! betrayed!
Our youth and lives and gold
Wasted - the homes we'd made
Shattered - in folly blind,
By treachery and spite,
By cowardice of mind,
And little men and light!..
If there be none to build
Out of this ruined world
The temple we have willed
With our flag there unfurled,
If rainbow none there shine
Across these skies of woe,
If seed of yours and mine
Through this same hell must go,
Then may my soul and those
Of all who died in vain,
(Be they of friends or foes)
Rise and come back again
From peace that knows no end,
From faith that knows no doubt,
To haunt and sear and rend
The men that sent us out. (1)

In the last year of the war the 'curse' had become a popular literary form.

The entry of the United States into the war in April, 1917, so strenuously solicited in the earlier years of the war, had a curious response. In 1916 America's diplomatic attempt to negotiate a peace had met with official rebuff by the Government, though there was some strenuous advocacy in pacifist circles:

> The pronouncement of Mr. Lloyd George that any step on the part of the U.S. or any other neutral in the direction of peace would be construed by England as an un-neutral pro-German move, though acclaimed by many, brings deep regret to others who truly love their country's renown..
>
> If the U.S. or any other neutral power is ready to lead the way in negotiations for peace in the name of civilisation, in the name of humanity let the belligerents hold themselves ready to give due consideration to their proposals for establishing public right in Europe. (2)

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(1) 'Soldier's Testament', signed 'Eques', The Nation, Vol. 20. p. 621.

(2) Emmeline Pethick Lawrence : The Nation, Vol. 20. p. 19. October, 1916.

The holocaust of the Somme was just ended, and it began to seem to many combatants that there was no military solution to the war. There was a basic recognition of impasse. It is interesting to note that Owen's 'Soldier's Dream' which presents a sudden cessation and re-commencement of hostilities in the hypothetical contrast of the differing actions of Christ and God, had an earlier draft. (1) In this, the action of God and Michael in keeping the war going is attributed to the 'man from U.S.A.':

> But at the port, a man from U.S.A.,
> Stopped us, and said: 'You go right back this minute.
> I'll follow. Christ, your miracle ain't in it,
> I'll get these rifles mended by today.

The mind that saw the intervention of Americans simply as a prolongation of the war must have been convinced that it was without end. By July, 1918 the role drafted earlier for the U.S.A. is given to God, whose instrument it has been in keeping a futile war going. The textual evidence of these revisions affords a tragic index of Owen's conviction and despair.

By the time the war had ended, the Edwardian trumpets were playing a different tune, with a splendidly typical Chestertonian lyric full of anti-American prejudice:

> Though the time comes when every Yankee circus
> Can use our soldiers for its Sandwich-men,
> When those that pay the piper call the tune,
> You will not dance....
>
> You will not march with Fatty Arbuckle,
> Though he have yet a favourable press,
> Tender as San Francisco to St. Francis
> Or all the angels of Los Angeles,
>
> They shall not storm the last unfallen fortress,
> The lonely castle where uncowed and free,

---

(1) See note, Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen, ed. Day Lewis p. 84. dated October, 1917.

Dwells the unknown and undefeated warrior
That did alone defeat Publicity. (1)

The personal sense of physical well-being, the sense of social unity, of Empire unity, had all been subjected to radical re-appraisal. Army life had been once a challenging novelty.

Drill, to the average recruit, was like some curious game or a new dance, various and rhythmic, and not very hard; it was rather fun for adults to be able to play at such things without being laughed at. (2)

But it was a novelty that began to wear thin, even on Salisbury Plain or Hyde Park. There was an intellectual gap as well as a social one that only the first fine enthusiasm had felt bridgeable. Ivor Gurney resented much of the seeming folly of military discipline:

If it were not for England, who would bear
This heavy servitude one moment more?
To keep a brothel, sweep and wash the floor
Of filthiest hovels were noble to compare
With this brass-cleaning life. Now here, now there,
Harried in foolishness, scanned curiously o'er
By fools made brazen by conceit, and store
Of antique witticisms thin and bare. (3)

Curney's reaction is very much that of the intellectual ranker. For the officer-poet there was a parallel disgruntlement, though differing in quality and degree:

How they hate me. I'm a fool.
I can't play bridge; I'm bad at Pool;
I cannot drone a comic song;
I can't talk Shop; I can't use Slang;
My jokes are bad, my stories long;
My voice will falter, break or hang,
Not blurt the sour sarcastic word,
And so my swearing sounds absurd.

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(1) G.K. Chesterton : 'To The Unknown Warrior', MWMA, p. 89.

(2) C.E. Montague : Disenchantment, London, 1968. p. 11.

(3) Ivor Gurney : 'Servitude', HUSS p. 71.

But come the talk; I found
Three or four others for an argument.
I forced the pace. They shifted their dull ground,
And went
Sprawling about the passages of Thought.
We tugged each other's words until they tore.
They asked me my philosophy : I brought
Bits of it forth and laid them on the floor.
They laughed and so I kicked the bits about
Then put them in my pocket one by one,
I, sorry I had brought them out,
They, grateful for the fun. (1)

Although there were political implications in both the earlier sense of social harmony and the later disruption of it, there was no attempt made to examine these in poetry. C.E. Montague could observe retrospectively -

When a man enlisted during the war
he found himself being the life of
the common man in a Communist
State.. He had ceased to be the
Economic Man. (2)

- but references tend to be more oblique. There is, implicitly, an awareness of a cultural and intellectual gap in Read's 'My Company'.

We halted on the roadside
In the starlight only,
And you sang your sad home-songs,
Dirges which I standing outside you
Coldly condemned. (3)

But it is part of the 'history' of the war that just as the naive sense of social oneness was soon discarded, and old social compartmentalisations reconstructed, so, as in 'My Company' these differences are later relegated by the moral force of the 'greater love' ideal, by comradeship, though this new sense of unity relates only to the combatants.

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(1) Harold Monro : 'Officers' Mess', ULD, p. 19.

(2) C.E. Montague : Disenchantment, London, 1968. p. 65.

(3) Herbert Read : 'My Company', ULD, p. 87.

My earlier contention that the 'greater love' fellowship was basically a moral feeling, though doubtless translated into meaningful action and attitude, gains support from the evidence of racial and group dissensions. Allied unity had perhaps always been a myth, but hopes of solidarity were drowned in rivalries and prejudice. Montague writes of mutual recriminations between British troops and Canadians and Australians, (1) and by 1917, he suggests, Anglo-French relations were at a low ebb, and the entente another political catch-phrase.

> Our first vision of victory had
> gone the way of its frail sister-dream
> of a perfect Allied comradeship. French
> soldiers sneered at British now, and
> British at French. (2)

There is some evidence,too, of anti-semitism. Some of this is of the type we find in, say, Eliot, principally the rather unoriginal ascription to Jewry of capitalistic wealth and profiteering. Although in Osbert Sitwell's "Judas and the Profiteer" and 'The Modern Abraham' (3) there is no overt anti-semitic statement, diction and occasionally imagery do suggest a latent hostility. That the hostility was more than latent at times is incontrovertibly stated by Rosenberg:

> Moses, from whose loins I sprung,
> hit by a lamp in his blood
> Ten immutable rules, a moon
> For mutable lampless men.
>
> The blonde, the bronze, the ruddy,
> With the same heaving blood,
> Keep tide to the moon of Moses.
> Then why do they sneer at me? (4)

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(1) See Disenchantment, p. 96.

(2) ibid.

(3) HUSS pp. 125 - 6.

(4) Isaac Rosenberg : 'The Jew', CP. p. 71.

In terms of chronology, the final destruction of the social and political aspirations to unity and harmony coincided with the growing sense of community among the combatants. That this too was a fragile thing is equally apparent, vulnerable to all sorts of group prejudices. For many , it was probably very limited in its scope - the company, the battalion, the regiment. The moral-religious ideal of the 'Greater Love' - was held with conviction only by a few, and the number who elevated it to an ethic, fewer still. But the general sense of comradeship was enough in itself to widen still further the distance between Blighty and No Man's Land. It is interesting to note that American enthusiasm always saw 'Over there' as the war; home was the base. But for British combatants, held so long in the war's stalemate, 'over there' was Blighty; in other words, No Man's Land was the base from which their imaginations worked, their new 'home'. To Blunden, the real values of living as he understood them were in England.

> Over there are faith, life, virtue in the sun. (1)

An article in The Nation relates this sense of separation very succinctly:

> We used to blaspheme and laugh and say, "Oh, it's only the papers. People at home can't really be like that." But after some months in England I've come to the conclusion that your papers don't caricature you so mercilessly as we supposed. No, the fact is we've drifted apart. We have slaved for Rachel, but it looks as if we've got to live with Leah. (2)

The separation no longer took the form of nostalgic longing. It was bitterly recriminatory.

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(1) Edmund Blunden : 'Report on Experience', HUSS. p. 49.

(2) The Nation, Vol. 20., Oct. 21st, 1916. 'Some Reflections of a Soldier', pp. 104 - 6.

Gurney wrote how the troops at the front

> stayed and expected parcels from a grateful nation,
> But got few, Base pinched some, and sly Transport for candles,
> They got to us ragged, with neither string straight nor handles,
> And you had plenty in Blighty, and bread in bundles. (1)

E.A. Mackintosh lashed civilian hypocrisy:

> Fat civilians wishing they
> 'could go and fight the Hun'.
> Can't you see them thanking God
> That they're over forty-one. (2)

Sassoon castigated the curious compound of apathy and selfishness that characterised much civilian response in 'The Tombstone-Maker.

> 'You'd think so much bereavement would have made
> Unusual big demands upon my trade.
> The War comes cruel hard on some poor folk;
> Unless the fighting stops I'll soon be broke.' (3)

The old ideals, long abandoned in the disillusion of the trenches, some people, unpardonably to the soldiers, still maintained. But it was a world that could still afford 'Ideals', the 'land of Paunch-at-Ease'; in

> the world of Four-Square Meals
> Some cherish what they call 'Ideals'. (4)

But though Scott Moncrieff dismisses contemptuously those illusory 'ideals', he is one of the few who maintain hope of an ultimate politically-dictated betterment.

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(1) Ivor Gurney : 'Picture of Two Veterans', HUSS. p. 156.

(2) E.A. Mackintosh : 'Recruiting', ULD. p. 111.

(3) Sassoon : 'The Tombstone-Maker', CP. p. 27.

(4) Charles Scott Moncrieff : '1916 - A Review', Memories and Letters, Edinburgh, 1934. p. 217.

Gurney wrote how the troops at the front

> stayed and expected parcels from a grateful nation,
> But got few, Base pinched some, and sly Transport for candles,
> They got to us ragged, with neither string straight nor handles,
> And you had plenty in Blighty, and bread in bundles. (1)

E.A. Mackintosh lashed civilian hypocrisy:

> Fat civilians wishing they
> 'could go and fight the Hun'.
> Can't you see them thanking God
> That they're over forty-one. (2)

Sassoon castigated the curious compound of apathy and selfishness that characterised much civilian response in 'The Tombstone-Maker.

> 'You'd think so much bereavement would have made
> Unusual big demands upon my trade.
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But we, clear-visioned, who foresaw
The worst, yet failed to give the alarm,
Must hold a lantern to Reform:
For knives and forks and chairs and beds
Must substitute our hearts and heads. (1)

But, as his letters confirm, he was politically committed, with strong personal connections with leading political figures, in a way that few of his fellows were.

The girls who had been left behind shared in the general opprobrium. E.A. Mackintosh expressed his contempt for the part played by some girls in the general recruitment drive, a social and emotional blackmail that many soldiers now felt had been operated:

Girls with feathers, vulgar songs -
Washy verse on England's need - (2)

Sassoon attacked those female illusions that persisted in romanticising war.

You love us when we're heroes, home on leave,
Or wounded in a mentionable place.
You worship decorations; you believe
That chivalry redeems the war's disgrace. (3)

Such blindness is partly ignorance, partly an unimaginative and insensitive failure to get beyond the womb and the umbilical cord:

Husbands and sons and lovers; everywhere
They die; War bleeds us white.
Mothers and wives and sweethearts - they don't care
So long as He's all right. (4)

The juxtaposed syntax, the divinity ironically implicit in the capital 'H', suggest division and false values.

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(1) ibid.

(2) E.A. Mackintosh : 'Recruiting', ULD. p. 111.

(3) Sassoon : 'Glory of Women', CP. p. 79.

(4) Sassoon : 'Their Frailty', CP. pp. 79 - 80.

Petty personal vanities and girls' blandishments explained often why Tom, Dick and Harry were here, far more than the political significance of the conflict.

> He thought he'd better join - He wonders why.
> Someone had said he'd look a god in kilts,
> That's why; and may be, too, to please his Meg;
> Aye, that was it, to please the giddy jilts -
> Germans he scarcely thought of; all their guilts
> And Austria's, did not move him. (1)

And when Owen's 'Dead-Beat' collapsed, it was neither the 'Hun' nor 'these stiffs', the dead, that 'crazed him'. The roots of his collapse were 'over there'.

> Maybe his brave young wife, getting her fun
> In some new home, improved materially. (2)

Such social comment on the part played by women (no mention of their munitions work etc., nor of suffragettes) is patently not unrelated to the ethical base of 'the greater love', which often expressed itself in terms of the rejection of the love of man and woman. In the same way, the acrimonious relationships between fathers and sons is a social manifestation of the wider moral clash between the generations, related closely to the theme of sacrifice, and which we saw, <u>in extremis</u>, produce a division in the Trinity. In spite of his intense personal ties with his mother, Owen saw that very often such social ties were as irrelevant as organised Christianity, and offered as little consolation as conventional 'love'.

> O Mother, mother! Dad!
> Then smiled, at nothing, childlike, being dead.
> And the lofty Shrapnel-cloud
> Leisurely gestured, - Fool!
> And the falling splinters tittered.

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(1) Owen : 'Disabled', <u>CP</u>. p. 67.

(2) Owen : 'The Dead-Beat', <u>CP</u>. p. 72.

"My love!" one moaned. Love-languid seemed his mood,
Till, slowly lowered, his whole face kissed the mud.
And the Bayonets' long teeth grinned;
Rabbles of Shells hooted and groaned;
And the Gas hissed. (1)

Although this is not Owen at his most rewarding, one notes the subtle use of para-rhyme, and the oddly stilted and staccato effect of the stanza-pattern, creating with great technical skill, discord and hollowness.

In the whole shifting complex of social relationships it is well to remind ourselves that it was moral outrage that motivated the changing attitudes. The great gap between the moral values of the two 'nations' and the two generations accounts for the special severity with which the father-image was handled. Sassoon's 'The Fathers' (2) and Owen's 'S.I.W.' (3) both indicate the bitterness which was felt. E.A. Mackintosh's 'In Memoriam' (4) can, even now, startle us by the enormity of its conclusion. His war verse, till he was killed in 1916, was characterised by sincerity, directness and urgency. Technically, it is perhaps unsophisticated, but much of the poetry, in this specific context, even that of Owen, is largely a poetry of blunt statement. In Owen's case, the rather negative social criticisms, framed with an overtly curative intent, evolved into a more positive ethic and the texture of his poem grew richer and more subtle. Mackintosh did not live long enough, nor, I venture, was his poetic talent of the order that might have effected such translation.

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(1) Owen : 'The Last Laugh', CP. p. 59.

(2) Sassoon : CP. p. 74.

(3) Owen : CP. p. 74.

(4) E.A. Mackintosh : 'In Memoriam', ULD. pp. 94 - 5.

But his 'In Memoriam' is still significant because its blunt and daring conclusion is a positive metaphysical and moral statement. The horrors of physical death and degradation set his men, his 'fifty sons', in a relationship that even fathers could not challenge :

> Happy and young and gallant,
> They saw their first-born go,
> But not the strong limbs broken
> And the beautiful men brought low,
> The piteous writhing bodies,
> They screamed, 'Don't leave me, sir,'
> For they were only your fathers
> But I was your officer. (1)

Osbert Sitwell's 'Armchair' satirically pulls together many of the strands of social comment, for the 'armchair', age, is what he postulates bitterly as the prerequisite for the insane prolongation and promulgation of the war:

> If I were now of handsome middle-age,
> I should not govern yet, but still should hope
> To help the prosecution of this war.
> I'd talk and eat (though not eat wheaten bread).
> I'd send my sons, if old enough, to France.
>
> If I were old, or only seventy,
> Then should I be a good man in his prime.
> I should rule army corps; at my command
> Men would rise up, salute me, and attack
> - And die. Or I might also govern men
> By making speeches with my toothless jaws,
> Constant in chatter, until men should say,
> 'One grand old man is still worth half his pay!'
> That day, I'd send my grandsons out to France.
> - And wish I'd got ten other ones to send.
> (One cannot sacrifice too much, I'd say.) (2)

Indeed, the reaction against 'age' became on occasion so violent that death from natural causes became an obscenity.

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(1) ibid.

(2) Osbert Sitwell : 'Armchair', ULD. p. 112.

Not people killed in Battle - they're in France -
But horrible shapes in shrouds - old men who died
Slow natural deaths, - old men with ugly souls,
Who wore their bodies out with nasty sins. (1)

It is interesting here to note how 'slow' and 'natural' acquire from the context connotations of disgust and corruption, as if the process, stated to be natural, were a perversion.

Although most of the social criticism was of this negative kind, (destructive attacks on false illusions, civilian apathy, Sitwell's attacks on jingoists and profiteers, Owen and Sassoon lambasting Home Front complacency,) and though most of these attacks were symptomatic of the collapse of the initial hope of national unity and social harmony, and record the growing sense of division, there were also two important concerns, where the social and moral concerns coalesced. One was the concern for the individual confronted by the vast dehumanised inexorable war machine, and the other was pacificism. Let us consider these.

One of the consequences of modern warfare, because of its technology, because of the numbers involved, the sheer logistics, is that the war-machine tends to suffocate the individual will, both because it cannot legislate for it, and because the individual feels powerless to assert it in the face of such oppressive comprehensiveness. This was felt by the combatants, and few sensitive men could exult in it:

I am only a cog in a giant machine, a
    little link in the chain,
Waiting a word from the wagon-lines that
    the guns are hungry again:
Column-wagon to battery-wagon, and
    battery-wagon to gun;

---

(1) Sassoon : 'Repression of War Experience', CP. p. 90.

To the loader kneeling twixt trail and
wheel from the shops where the steam-lathes run.
There's a lone-male braying against the line
where the mud cakes fetlock-deep!
There's a lone soul* humming a hint of a
song in the barn where the drivers sleep;
And I hear the pash of the orderly's horse
as he canters him down the lane -
Another cog in the gun-machine, a link
in the self-same chain. (1)

Both technically and thematically this is reminiscent of Kipling or Robert Service. Despite the allusion to mud, one feels the dervishes might come over the dunes at any minute. And the happy acceptance of 'only a cog' is based on the sustaining of the illusion of national unity, where the shells run from 'the shops where the steam-lathes run' to the Front. Frankau's reactions were untypical of normal combatant reactions. An index of his temperament is, perhaps, that having fought at Loos and the Somme, having been invalided out in 1918, he should reappear as a Squadron-Leader in 1940.

The majority of sensitive combatants were perturbed by the constraining menace of the war machine, and disturbed by its destructive power on the individuals under their command. That they wrote so often of their men, ground into a dogged passivity, led to some critical misconception that I have already dealt with. But Sassoon wrote of the "exhausted ego" (2) and described his men -

Disconsolate men who stamp their sodden boots
And turn dulled, sunken faces to the sky
Haggard and hopeless. (3)

They were

Lines of grey, muttering faces, masked with fear. (4)

(1) Gilbert Frankau : 'Ammunition Column', HUSS. p. 62.

(2) Sassoon : 'Stretcher-Case', CP. p. 80.

(3) ibid : 'Prelude - The Troops', CP. p. 67.

(4) ibid : 'Attack', CP. p. 7.

And Owen, too, wrote to his mother -

> The men are just as Bairns-father has
> them - expressionless lumps. (1)

But this is not the complete picture. One critic, for example, writing about Sassoon's 'Wirers' describes

> "the dogged endurance of men patiently
> feeding their lives to a machine" (2)

There are positive qualities in 'dogged' and 'patiently' and we should not overlook these. It is a point I shall return to.

This sense of the smothering of the individual will produced some rather bizarre social and political consequences. Alec Waugh, in an article 'How the Soldier Saw the War', pinpoints the central statements:

> (The soldier's) daily work has been placed on the lowest and most elemental level...
>
> The sacrificial slaughter of human beings has become for them the natural setting of their daily lives..
>
> Individuality is lost. (3)

In a previous article, he had seen the immediate consequence of this as an inability 'to look before or after'; they were forced by military necessity to exist exclusively in their immediate present:

> War had become for them the natural state of being;
> they lived so entirely in the present that both the
> past and the future were equally tenuous and unreal. (4)

It must have been strange to be a soldier and read the political consequence of this - the problem of the 'soldier's vote'.

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(1) Owen : letter to his mother, dated January 4th, 1917. Letters, p.422.

(2) Geoffrey Bullough : Trend of Modern Poetry, Edinburgh, 1934, p. 97.

(3) Alec Waugh : 'How the Soldier Saw the War', The Nation, February 8th, 1919. Vol. 24. pp. 543 - 4.

(4) ibid: 'Blessed Banners', The Nation, Oct. 6, 1917. Vol.22.p.13.

An article in The Nation covers most of the ground with splendid intellectual detachment. The political concern as to which way five million votes might go seems a bit premature:

> At first sight it might appear probably that since the Army is now recruited from all classes and persuasions, its verdict on any given subject would not differ materially from that of any corresponding number of civilians.
>
> ..it is prudent to remember the intellectual stagnation into which the majority have sunk, a stagnation required by military discipline, applauded by the Government and Press, and rendered habitual by prolonged exile in a foreign land...It is simply that to men living in the continual anticipation of sudden death, discussions as to the best means of protecting and regulating life begin to look a little academic... they could no longer be called citizens except in the language of very romantical whiggery. (1)

Combatants, though they felt 'citizenship' in terms of moral values of a new kind, would have been reluctant to abandon their political rights of citizenship 'over there'. But the struggle between the individual will and the war-machine did not result, for them, in political consequences at all. Frederic Manning found a positive metaphysical lesson and psychological therapy to result:

> ...though the pressure of external circumstances seemed to wipe out individuality, leaving little if any distinction between man and man, in himself each man became conscious of his own personality as of something very hard, and sharply defined against a background of other men, who remained merely generalised as 'the others'. The mystery of his own being increased for him enormously; and he had to explore that doubtful darkness alone; finding a foothold here, a hand-hold there, grasping one support after another and relinquishing it when it yielded, crumbling; the sudden menace of ruin, as it slid into the unsubstantial past, calling forth another effort, to gain another precarious respite. If a man could not be certain of himself, he could be certain of nothing. The problem which confronted them all equally, though some were unable or unwilling to define it, did not concern death so much as the affirmation of their own will in the face of death;

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(1) 'The Private Soldier's Vote', in The Nation by 'At the Front'. It is dated July 13th, 1918.

> and once the nature of the problem was clearly stated, they realised that its solution was continuous, and could never be final. Death set a limit to the continuance of one factor in the problem, and peace to that of another; but neither of them really affected the nature of the problem itself. (1)

Manning's reaction was that of the sensitive and intellectually resourceful ranker. The Officer's reaction introduced another factor, for the concern was not so personal, but related to 'the others' by the responsibility of command. Ford Madox Ford has a most telling passage, where with vivid imagery and concentrated language, he hurls his fears and feelings together:

> Intense dejection; endless muddles; endless follies; endless villainies. All these men given into the hands of the most cynically carefree intrigues in long corridors who made plots that harrowed the hearts of the world. All these men toys: all these agonies mere occasions for picturesque phrases to be put into politicians' speeches without heart or even intelligence. Hundreds of thousands of men tossed here and there in that sordid and gigantic mud-browness of mid-winter - By God, exactly as if they were nuts wilfully picked and thrown over the shoulder by magpies... But men. Not just populations. Men you worried over there. Each man a man with a back bone, knees, breeches, braces, a rifle, a home, passions, fornicates, drinks, pals, some scheme of the universe, corns, inherited diseases, a greengrocer's business, a milk walk, a paper stall, brats, a slut of a wife...(2)

But few of the combatants seem to have dealt with this problem of the individual's survival as a central theme in poetry, a problem that was, in essence, perhaps too metaphysical for trench poetry and immature talent. Owen was one of the few whose cast of mind was adequate to the problem. His 'Insensibility',(3) the most significant poetic analysis of the pressure written during the hostilities, is interesting for the way Owen adapts the situation to effect a moral judgement.

(1) Frederick Manning : Her Privates We, London, 1930, p. 203.

(2) Ford Madox Ford : No More Parades, London, 1925. Part I. 1.

(3) Owen : 'Insensibility', CP. pp. 37 - 8

The poem is in six short sections, the first three dealing with the inevitable dulling impact of the juggernaut:

> And some cease feeling
> Even themselves or for themselves.
> Dullness best solves
> The tease and doubt of shelling,
> And Chance's strange arithmetic
> Comes simpler than the reckoning of their shilling.
> They keep no check on armies decimation. (1)

Technically, this is the statement of an artist in control of his medium, vivid and economic. The frustrated para-rhyme, the contrast it enforces between 'shelling' and 'shilling', the way the half-rhyme picks up the rhyme with 'feeling', the concision that is almost epigrammatic, the last line resoundingly comprehensive and final - this is technique producing a sense of inevitability, full of meaning and emotion.

The first and third sections relate to this. Both begin with the good fortune of the 'happy' who can deny their human reactions, but the word reminds us too of the earlier 'happy warriors'.

> Happy are men who yet before they are killed
> Can let their veins run cold.
> Whom no compassion fleers..((2)

'Fleer' means to 'mock', but it suggests also a physical reaction, pulling a wry face. The soldiers' indifference, callous, inhuman, may be a tragic necessity. It is certainly part of a general indifference and callousness.

> Men, gaps for filling:
> Losses, who fight have fought
> Longer; but no one bothers. (3)

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(1) ibid.

(2) ibid.

(3) ibid.

The off-hand casual second part to a last line is very typically Owen. The experience of the troops has been such as to deaden imagination, spirit, the human ability to feel pain or fear, to respond through the senses. Some such reactions would be a burden, others have been experienced already beyond a limit that was supportable.

In the next two sections Owen expresses his compassion for those who lack the intellectual equipment and resources of emotion and imagination to envisage the contemporary tragedy. Such happy unconcern is born of simplicity, of simpleness, and the soldier is now so dulled as to be able to see his task only through the 'blunt and lashless' eyes of such natural dullards. For -

> Alive, he is not vital overmuch;
> Dying, not mortal overmuch;
> Nor sad, nor proud,
> Nor curious at all.
> He cannot tell
> Old men's placidity from his. (1)

Finally, Owen turns his scorn to those who are not deadened by the war, and whose spiritual 'paucity that never was simplicity' is a deliberate and selfish self-immunisation against compassion and feeling for the tragic human condition, those who wilfully will not be touched by

> Whatever mourns when many leave these shores
> Whatever shares
> The eternal reciprocity of tears. (2)

In this poem, superbly touched by his sense of tragic necessity, Owen blends his perception of the dulling de-humanising process of modern war with the general theme of human responsibility, and we see instanced once more that the Home Front's socio-political concerns tended to appear as moral statement on the Western Front.

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(1) ibid.

(2) ibid.

This struggle between the war pressure and the individual must be seen as twofold. There were the poets, sensitive, conscious of the war's oppressive influence on themselves. But there was also their awareness of the impact of the war on the ordinary men they commanded. But there were no adequate terms of reference in the trench situation by which the 'ordinariness' might be defined except that the soldier was there, doggedly stayed there, and very probably died there. What they did do was to define it by reference to the social background and attitudes that had shaped 'ordinariness' in pre-war England. But again, this sort of social framework was created to make moral not social comment. For the contrast between the mundane hum-drum of life in England and the dirt and degradation of his immediate context implied a moral condemnation of war. There was no casual relationship one to the other.

Owen, in 'The Letter', 'Disabled', 'The Chances' (1) celebrated the unprepossessing ordinariness of his men. Sassoon saw them

> .....in foul dug-outs, gnawed by rats,
> And in the ruined trenches, lashed with rain,
> Dreaming of things they did with balls and bats,
> And mocked by hopeless longing to regain
> Bank holidays, and picture shows, and spats,
> And going to the office in the train. (2)

The soldier was, perhaps,

> a young man with a meagre wife
> And two small children in a Midland town;
> He showed their photographs to all his mates,
> And they considered him a decent chap
> Who did his work and hadn't much to say,
> And always laughed at other people's jokes
> Because he hadn't any of his own. (3)

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(1) Wilfred Owen : CP. pp. 60, 67 and 71.

(2) Sassoon : 'Dreamers', CP. p. 72.

(3) ibid : 'A Working Party', CP. p. 20.

Both Sassoon and Owen tried to catch this 'ordinariness' in poems where Tommy Atkins was seen writing home: "This leaves me in the pink", "Your loving sweetheart, Willie" (1) Owen essayed in 'The Letter' (2) a short monologue, with an attempt at dialect. The poem's existence has an interest in that it was a technical experiment to catch not only the attitude but the authentic voice of the ordinary soldier. But the effort to utilise 'language such as men do use' was a disaster: The result is probably Owen's worst poem.

Pacifism is a moral conviction, but inevitably the expression of it in word or action generates social reaction. During the First World War a great deal of social opprobrium was directed against pacifist sentiment.

> Emmanuel's vanguard dying
> For right and not for rights,
> My Lord Apollyon lying
> To the State-kept Stockholmites,
> The Pope, the swithering Neutrals,
> The Kaiser and his Gott -
> Their roles, their goals, their naked souls
> He knew and drew the lot. (3)

Here, Kipling attacks the 'enemies within', using Bunyan as the national voice.

> John Bunyan had 'em typed and filed
> In Sixteen Eighty-two.

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(1) Sassoon : 'In the Pink', CP. p. 18.

(2) Owen : 'The Letter', CP. p. 60.

(3) Kipling : 'The Holy War', 1917.

But historically, pacificism was also of immense political significance at the time, and the Peace Movement was inextricably linked with the Labour Movement at the time. Middle-class opinion in general still supported the war but working-class opinion, and those who shaped it, while still accepting the necessity of fighting till victory, never quite lost sight of that other enemy, capital. There was a suspicion that "the class enemy could even be serving the ends of the national enemy in a conscious or unconscious desire to keep the war going for profit. Alternatively the propertied classes, seeing the need for a united front against a workers' revolution, might seek the wrong sort of compromise peace." (1) The Labour Party was split on the horns of its dilemma:

> The Labour Party wished to help win
> the war while preserving an independent
> position in the post-war domestic struggle. (2)

But the pacificism of the combatant poets was quite differently contextualised. All the evidence of the poetry, as we saw in the previous section, suggests that their pacificism was the expression of their antipathy to the futile prolongation of <u>this</u> war, a reaction to their immediate situation. Their overt pacifist statements occur far less frequently in their poetry than one would suppose; it tended to come in private utterance, in letters:

> Suffer dishonour and disgrace, but never
> resort to arms. Be bullied, be outraged,
> be killed; but do not kill. (3)

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(1) W.N. Medlicott : <u>Contemporary England, 1914 - 64</u>. London, 1967. p. 57.

(2) <u>ibid</u> : p. 62.

(3) Owen : letter, dated May 2nd, 1917. <u>Letters,</u> p. 461.

Their poetry, concerned as it was with the presentation of the specific to a large extent, does not produce such outright conviction, though the poetry of D.H. Lawrence does:

> The foe can take our goods, and homes and land,
> Also the lines that still he may require,
> But leave us still to love, still leave us love. (1)

When Owen, whose letter is quoted above, made pacifist avowal in poetry, as in 'Strange Meeting', it is the statement of the artist and not the moralist. Similarly, Sassoon's famed declaration in The Times (July, 1917), though his attitude had been reinforced by contact with noted pacifist figures, remained firmly rooted in specific objections to the circumstances surrounding this war:

> I am making this statement as an act
> of wilful defiance of military authority,
> because I believe that the war is being
> deliberately prolonged by those who have the
> power to end it...I have seen and endured
> the suffering of the troops, and can no longer
> be a party to prolong these sufferings for ends
> which I believe to be evil and unjust..
> On behalf of those who are suffering now I
> make this protest against the deception which
> is being practised on them; also I believe that
> I may help to destroy the callous complacence
> with which the majority at home regard the
> continuance of agonies which they do not share,
> and which they have not sufficient imagination
> to realise.

To throw one's M.C. in the Mersey was a political act, an act of deliberate protest. To throw it in the Ancre, literally or metaphorically, would have been meaningless, because the public act was performed in front of the wrong audience. Sassoon's pacificism was emotional, and as much social protest as moral detestation.

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(1) D.H. Lawrence : 'We have gone too far', HUSS. p. 86.

Being serving soldiers their protest was enhanced in one sense, but restricted in another. Their poetry was motivated by, imbued with, a deep sense of the immorality of war, but their position was such as to limit the directness of pacifist action and statement. To condemn war as immoral, while still fighting, does protect from the social opprobrium that civilians like Lawrence or Bertrand Russell experienced. But it does limit the efficacy of overt statement which would conflict with perceived action.

Then, at last, it was all over. There has always been a feeling that the Great War was so insane and futile that it could never have happened, that it was a macabre fiction, unreal. Fed with all available data, the computer pronounced that it could not have occured. And we have all reached similar conclusions to the computer. That it should end on the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month in 1918 seems to verify our conclusion - it was all a fiction, stage-managed by insanity. At that time, there was a momentary sense of almost joyous relief, and Sassoon captured this transient but ecstatic feeling:

> Everyone suddenly burst out singing;
> And I was filled with such delight
> As prisoned birds must find in freedom,
> Winging wildly across the white
> Orchards and dark-green fields; on-on-and
> out of sight.
>
> Everyone's voice was suddenly lifted;
> And beauty came like the setting sun:
> My heart was shaken with tears; and horror
> Drifted away...O, but Everyone
> Was a bird; and the song was wordless; the
> singing will never be done. (1)

---

(1) Sassoon : 'Everyone Sang', CP. p. 124.

The sense of wonder, the quite incredible relief, the 'singing', in fact, was very soon done. Like the riotous explosion of public relief in Trafalgar Square, celebrated in W.W. Gibson's 'Bacchanal',(1) the ecstatic sense of deliverance was dissipated as the joy of Armistice was translated into the harsh reality of peace. The terms of the Treaty of Versailles produced bitterness and disillusion, seeming to defeat the purpose of the war:

> The soldiers could only look on while the
> scurvy performance dragged itself out till
> the meanest of treaties was signed at
> Versailles. 'Fatal Versailles!' as General Sir
> Ian Hamilton said for us all...(2)

The forces that shaped the peace were as ruthless as those that had guided the war:

> A fine sturdy sneer at the notion of doing
> anything chivalrous was by this time the mode.
> "I hope to God," an oldish and high non-
> combatant general said.."that there's going to
> be no rot about not kicking a man when he's down." (3)

The fruits of victory had turned sour before they could even be gathered in:

> So we had failed - had won the
> fight and lost the prize; the garland
> of the war was withered before it was gained. (4)

The soldiers returned from the war, growing rather cynical and bitter already. They were exhausted, and they wanted a decent peace, but first they wanted rest, physical, mental and spiritual.

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(1) W.W. Gibson : 'Bacchanal', ULD. p. 145.

(2) C.E. Montague : Disenchantment, London, 1968. p. 135.

(3) C.E. Montague : Disenchantment, London, 1968. p. 135.

(4) ibid : p. 136.

What they returned to instead, was the resumption of all those other wars, conflicts of Capital and Labour, Orange and Green, Left and Right, as Europe began the task of reshaping itself.

> It is certain that the larger movements of social unrest amongst the workers in Britain were at the beginning fomented, not by or among the men who fought abroad, but by and among the men who stayed at home. It was the great centres of home industry which were exempted from the conscription who first agitated the nation. (1)

Thomas Hardy's voice still sadly questioned the purposefulness of the wastage, the folly.

As silence fell,

> Aye: all was hushed. The about-to-fire fired not,
> The aimed-at moved away in trance-lipped song.
> One checkless regiment slung a clinching shot
> And turned. (2)

Hardy caught dramatically the physical sense of the cessation of hostilities. But the fact that it has ended does not answer any of the questions.

> The Sinister Spirit sneered: 'It had to be!'
> And again the Spirit of Pity whispered, 'Why?' (3)

Lord Dunsany sounded a muted note in 'A Dirge of Victory', (4) remembering that the victory was the achievement of the dead, more than the living. There is an over-riding sense of gladness just to be home again, to be alive, something still, too, of political hope, in 'Now to be Still and Rest'.(5)

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(1) C.F.G. Masterman : England After War, London, 1922.

(2) Hardy : 'And there was a great Calm', HUSS. pp. 73 - 5.

(3) ibid.

(4) Lord Dunsany : 'A Dirge of Victory', ULD. pp. 145 - 6.

(5) P.H.B. Lyon : 'Now to be Still and Rest', ULD. p. 146.

Life will be resumed and renewed, but for now there must be rest -

> To hear our names or voices we love, and after
> Turn with a smile to sleep and our dreams again.
> Then - with a new-born strength, the sweet rest over,
> Gladly to follow the great white road once more,
> To work with a song on our lips and the heart of a lover,
> Building a city of peace on the wastes of war. (1)

But 'the great white road' was to be a deal more tortuous than Lyon's rhetoric anticipated, and the world it led to was a seedy and shabby patchwork of compromise, expediency and recrimination. Something new was to evolve painfully in some parts of Europe, in Russia, even in Germany, but in Britain, reforming zeal was tempered by British moderation.

> The disbelief, the suspicion, the vacuous
> space in the disendowed heart, the
> spiritual rubbish-heap of draggled banners
> and burst dreams - all that blank,
> unlighting and unwarming part of
> Satanism was (the Englishman's), without
> any other: a Lucifer cold as a
> moon prompted him listlessly, not to
> passionate efforts of crime, but to
> self-regarding and indolent apathy. (2)

What the poetry of the returning combatants showed was a realisation that the old corruption and power had re-asserted itself.

> For the world's events have rumbled on
> since those gagged days,
> Like traffic checked while at the crossing of city-ways.(3)

Laurence Housman, in a poem of the passionate rhythms of oratory, protests bitterly:

> We fought at Armageddon for the brotherhood of Man;
> And safe within their fences the tricksters plied their trade.
> 'Twas the old fight we fought; and it ends as it began:
> The gamblers held their hands till the last Trump was played.

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(1) ibid.

(2) p. 142. Disenchantment.

(3) Sassoon : 'Aftermath', CP. p.

We fought at Armageddon for the freedom of mankind;
I fought, and you fought, and here our bones lie strewn.
The flesh is stript from off us, the chains remain behind,
And the freedom that we fought for is an unremembered tune. (1)

But not only did it seem that the Old Brigade has resumed power; the returning soldiers had to find their niches in society. For now that the war was over, 'Heroes became bores' (2), and after so much that had been so extraordinary, the ordinary had to be resumed.

here we are at the workman's entrance
clock in and shed your eminence. (3)

Something had gone out of many who had fought with such stubbornness in the trenches. Now they -

lay stubborn courage by,
riding dull-eyed and silent in the train
to old men's stools; or sell gay-coloured socks
and listen fearfully for Death. (4)

Their youthful energy seemed to have been consumed. Some returned to their studies, to find their four years for King and Country had become one of those handicaps that evoke no sympathy:

"no one talked heroics now, and we
Must just go back and start again once more,
You threw four years into the melting-pot -
Did you indeed!" these others cry. " Oh well,
The more fool you!"
And we're beginning to agree with them. (5).

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(1) Lawrence Housman : 'Armageddon - and After', HUSS. pp. 79 - 80.

(2) Osbert Sitwell : 'The Next War', MWMA. p. 179.

(3) Herbert Read : 'A short poem for Armistice Day', ULD.p. 151.

(4) Edgell Rickword : 'War and Peace', HUSS. p. 113.

(5) V.M. Brittain : 'Lament of the Demobilised', Oxford Poetry, 1920.

Wilfred Owen was dead, killed one week before the Armistice; Rosenberg, too, was dead, as were so many of the minor voices that recorded the war's progression. Those who survived had to record the ultimate dismal chapter. What, in effect, have they recorded for us? It seems to me that they told us of the suffering and agony of a generation; they have presented the grim anti-heroic realities of the war, the impact on man of modern technological warfare; they forged from their experience a new notional concept of war. But they told, too, the sad progression of human hope for a better and braver world to disillusion and despair about present and future. Those who survived, exhausted as they were, had to confirm suspicions as to the ultimate utility of it all, in their final depressing realisation in the peace.

SECTION V

Let me preface this attempt to precis my findings by stating one fact that appears incontrovertible - that the Great War has retained a unique position in the national recollection, in the national imagination, and in the national conscience. It is still true that we 'define' war in its terms and by relation to it. This is as true of my generation as of my father's, and of the preceding one that waged it.

> Whenever war is spoken of
> I find
> The war that was called Great invades the mind:
> The grey militia marches over land
> A darker mood of grey
> Where fractured tree-trunks stand
> And shells, exploding, open sudden fans
> Of smoke and earth...(1)

But it is mere speculation to estimate how much of this impact derives from the unique character of the war itself, that

> Harmsworth books have sepia'd, (2)

and how much derives from the literature, the art, the photography, the memoirs, the drama and film that commemorate it. But in view of the past and current representation of 1914 - 18 war poetry in anthologies, there seems little doubt that it has played its part: The names of Brooke, Sassoon, Owen are as much an integral part of 'the war' as Ypres, Somme, Passchendaele or Vimy Ridge. Historically, there seems little doubt that the poetry played an important part in the formulation of a modern concept of war.

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(1) Vernon Scannel : 'The Great War'.

(2) Peter Porter : 'Somme and Flanders'.

But what of its intrinsic merits as poetry? Basically, I have tried to effect in this dissertation an evaluation of the poetry and to suggest relevant critical bases from which such meaningful evaluation might be attempted. This involved me in the examination of current critical conceptions that I regarded as limiting, in the general sense, and as producing specific distortion and misrepresentation.

Looked at retrospectively, what, in terms of its practitioners, was the poetry of the Great War? First, I agree with the assessment of Day Lewis that the poetry of Wilfred Owen contains "probably the greatest poems about war in our literature". (1) The triangle, then, has an apex. If its base is a host of minor talents, forgotten now, or remembered for one poem, one line -
E.A. Mackintosh, Leslie Coulson, Lord Dunsany, Julian Grenfell, W.N. Hodgson, Dynely Hussey, Joseph Lee, C. Scott Moncrieff, F.W. Harvey, Francis Ledwidge, P.H.B. Lyon, E.W. Tennant, Cyril Winterbottom, Alec Waugh, Patrick Macgill, Max Plowman, Willoughby Weaving, T.P. Cameron Wilson and unnamed others -
is this more or less than the nature of the majority of poetic movements? That a generation was impelled to record its agony in verse, says something collectively about the emotional necessity of poetry.

But no 'literary' triangle is made of base and apex. We find also the rich if unfulfilled poetic imagination and vision of Isaac Rosenberg, the blunt poetic assault of Sassoon, who committed his talent to a curative intent and found his stature grow to meet the demands of the immediate situation.

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(1) C. Day Lewis : Intro. to Wilfred Owen, Collected Poems, London, 1964. p. 11.

Perhaps his strength and weakness derive both from the fact that he was the most published of all the major poetic talents at the time.

Two of the finest nature poets of our century, Blunden and Edward Thomas, wrote of the war in greater and lesser degree. The Imagists, Herbert Read, Aldington, Ford Madox Ford, the enigmatic Robert Graves, minor humorists and satirists like Osbert Sitwell, A. P. Herbert, A.A. Milne, the strange two voices of Ivor Gurney, the terse stoicism of C.H. Sorley, all pack the triangle. W.W. Gibson subscribes a brutal realism, and the Georgians, Brooke, Robert Nichol, John Freeman, Binyon, Harold Monro, mingle with the more powerful voices of Hardy and Kipling. A.E. Housman, Chesterton, the pacifist free verse of D.H. Lawrence, are all interwoven into the fabric of Great War poetry. In terms of variety, personalities, influence, is this short period any less rich than the Metaphysicals, Cavalier love poets, the Pre-Raphaelites? It seems to me remarkable that amidst an army of minor versifiers we can discern the true accent of at least one significant poetic talent, and several lesser but genuine voices. That this should be so in extremely adverse physical conditions, and when the two greatest poets of the time, Yeats and Eliot, were elsewhere, is surprising.

And the literary historian must be aware that far from being the work of the fag-end of romanticism, the poetry of the war is inextricably integrated with the three most significant periodical publications of the time - Marsh's Georgian Poetry (1911-21), Wheels, which appeared annually, (1916-21) and the imagist anthologies, Des Imagistes (1914) and Some Imagist Poets (1915-17). What the combatant poets began their 'war' with was indeed the small arms of their inheritance, and, technically, all that Georgians and Imagists had in

common was the skill to produce what Daiches referred to as 'a static lyric'. It is the failure to see what they did with this, how it evolved under the stress of modern warfare, that hampers so much criticism.

> Where in 1914 and 1915 war was thought to be a purifier in its effects upon combatants, a therapeutic or a toughener of the moral fibre, the lyric form was adequate. A poet could well sing the sentiments of William Watson or Rupert Brooke, and any overtones caught from the nineteenth century were advantageous. But once the total attitude changed it would have been bitter to renounce the lyric for a more philosophical medium, to abandon stanzaic movement for blank or free verse such as had been discovered at the opening of the century but was not developed more extensively until after the war. Where in 1966 and onwards war becomes a brutalising agent and the soldier a degraded patient driven into a hell of insanity, hysteria and cowardice, it invites ridicule to sing of it in lyrical measures. Only Isaac Rosenberg - always the odd man out - attempted the ambitious dramatic form in the trenches, while the epic, like the novel, was beyond the power of a fighter in the middle of a war. (1)

Whatever critical qualification one may wish to apply to this poetry, can we say that it often 'invites ridicule'? We have discovered in the last year or two that 'protest' and 'song' are not incompatible. And is there really much 'singing' attempted in post-Somme poetry? Propaganda, documentary, satire, irony, elegy, protest, denunciation - but little sound of 'singing'. As for the suggestion that the substitution of blank or free verse for stanzaic movement would have been beneficial, measure this hypothesis against Professor Bullough's evaluation of what was actually achieved:

> It was Owen's privilege to bring a new dignity to war poetry and to familiar measures considered by many to be outworn..
> It was the war time disintegration of the 'cadence' which caused the post-war return to traditional rhythms.

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(1) M. Hussey : Poetry of the First World War, London, 1967. p.21.

> When (Osbert Sitwell) used free verse he fell into formlessness; the best of his satires were written in regular metres under the influence of Mr. Sassoon, and directed against profiteers, armchair warriors, religious jingoists. (1)

J.H. Johnston has a passage that is a succinct statement of his thesis and it provokes in me a questioning of the elasticity of the term 'lyric' as he employs it:

> Whatever their individual poetic reputations or pre-occupations may have been prior to August 1914, when the war broke out those who were immediately affected naturally turned to the brief lyric as the most convenient means of expressing their sense of participation in the national crisis. Considering the pressure of time, circumstances, and emotion, and, in most cases their own youthful poetic practice, such a development is not surprising. Nor is it surprising that throughout the course of the war the soldier-poets continued to employ the contemporary lyric form. They used it for a remarkable variety of ends: patriotic, meditative, descriptive, satiric, and elegiac; what might be called the lyric response, moreover, permeated and influenced the character of all major narrative efforts. Again, the nature of the crisis, as it prolonged itself into months of bitter struggle and exacted unprecedented effort and suffering, seemed to demand the swift and urgent expression that only the lyric could afford. (2)

If the term 'lyric' is to be meaningful, it cannot be made to mean too much. Johnston seems to have abandoned 'singing' as a criterion of 'lyric', and he concentrates instead on the lack of objectivity as the limiting factor. But there is no reason why the individual poet's personal sense of loss, horror, anguish, tension should not be the subject of war poetry. Indeed, theimplication of Johnston's comment is that this might well be what combatant poetry of necessity was. But criticism still mourns the heroic, the epic, the big canvas.

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(1) Geoffrey Bullough : The Trend of Modern Poetry, Edinburgh, 1934. p. 101.

(2) J.H. Johnston : English Poetry of the First World War. London, 1964. p. 24.

What Mr. Hussey in the previous comment did not mention was that Rosenberg, 'the odd man out', when he essayed the dramatic form produced the least satisfactory poetry in his 'Trench Poems'. And when David Jones produced, more than a decade later, the big canvas of In Parenthesis, he wrote a synthesis of poetry and prose, the texture of which is still highly lyrical.

Bernard Bergonzi's conclusion to his Heroes' Twilight seems to me the sanest appraisal of the relevant poetry, and it is significant here that he touches on the parallel development of what they achieved notionally and technically:

> If we now regard war as, on occasion, still necessary, in the way that abattoirs and operating-theatres are necessary, we do not feel the need to adorn it with the tinsel of f actitious glory. This much we learnt from the writers of the Great War, who absorbed its shock and employed their art to change a generation's modes of feeling. In the course of doing so, they undermined a whole range of traditional responses: heroism, as a kind of behaviour, might still be possible, but not the rhetoric and gestures of heroism....
> the best of them did more than register a hopeless trauma: in confronting unimagined degrees of horror they discovered new modes of order and even beauty. In their writing they have preserved the images by which men endeavour to crystallise and shape experiences. (1)

My own evaluation accords with this: in more precise terms, I have attempted to instance and enumerate these technical changes in the complex changing interrelationship of attitude and technique, to relate the pressures, particularly the moral pressures, that impelled new modes of order. We were aware of a massive lexical shift, which was important as symptomatic of other changes. It represented, in the first instance, a desire to come to grips with the real. That their notion of the 'real' was circumscribed by the reality of grim modern

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(1) Bernard Bergonzi : Heroes' Twilight, London, 1965. p. 222.

warfare goes without saying, but the intent is important. It instances the remedy that, for instance, J.M. Synge advocated for poetry as a curative for mere word-painting, that language had to become brutal to be meaningfully significant once more. But this lexical shift is indicative, too, of an inversion, even perversion, of Romantic concepts. The Romantic equation of beauty and truth is supplanted by an equation of ugliness and truth. It is probably, in a philosophic sense, no more true, but it seemed so to them in the context of the appalling conditions and pressures created by technological warfare. The pathetic fallacy was grimly restated, and the old harmony that was the basis of Romanticism was undermined. What these shifts indicated was the progressive sense of the isolation of man.

Related to this lexical shift, was a change in notions of the poet's function. I have, I think, sufficiently detailed this. What it signified was social commitment,and the return of satire clearly exemplifies this.

Formally, there was considerable experimentation. The short introspective and static lyric was implemented by the short lyric-narrative, the dramatic anecdotal, the ironic counterpointing, the pungently epigrammatic, the elegiac. We saw, too, in the poetry of Blunden, Sassoon, Read, attempts at narrative syntheses, not to recount events, but to make moral statements. The 'successful' 'Night Patrol' of A. Graeme West, successful in that it satisfied the criteria of criticism, (though successful, too, in its own right) maintained its formal control because it was neither motivated by curative intent nor concerned with the large-scale military situation.

The texture of poetry showed either an urgent directness, combined with considerable graphic power or it grew richer in imagery, in

metaphor. The facile rhetoric was not only rejected on principle, but was found hopelessly inadequate in practice. It is indeed often a flawed poetry; there are the scars of haste, of hysteria. There is the abuse of the melodramatic, there is satire without wit, there is much that is low voltage versifying or mere doggerel, but where the compulsion to say something that has dug into the poet's experience finds powerful words and form, - and this happens too frequently to be coincidental - we have poetry about modern war that is the best English literature can offer. Criticism cannot require more.

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